5 Times Sonic Caught Himself Before Calling Them 'Mom & Dad' and 1 Time He Didn't Hold Back

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5 Times Sonic Caught Himself Before Calling Them 'Mom & Dad' and 1 Time He Didn't Hold Back

by Humanities_Handbag, Invader_Sam

Summary

Sonic, Tom and Maddie adjust to life under one roof, with all the angst and shenanigans you'd expect.

Rated for the occassional swear word.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The First Time

He'd never slept in a bed before. Well, there'd been a bed in that motel on the way to San Fransisco, but that didn't really count. And he hadn't so much 'slept' as he'd 'passed out from sheer exhaustion due to being on the run from a megalomaniac'. So, again, it didn't count. This whole thing was new.

Waking up in a bed.

A bed that was *his*.

In a room that was *his*.

In a house.

A house with other people.

People who'd given him this room.

This bed, shaped like a race car.

If he thought about it too long, too hard, his chest got tight.

Like it was doing now.

There was a tapping from the floor, where the pull-down stairs were, but he didn't answer. Instead, he pulled the comforter up over his head, rolling away from the sound.

“Sonic?” Tom's voice, muffled through the wood and insulation and drywall, didn't sound concerned. Merely curious. “You gonna wake up sometime today? It's almost noon.”

The tightness in the hedgehog's chest didn't go away. In the darkness under the covers, he shut his burning eyes. *'Just go away. Please. Just go–'*

Another voice, softer, sweeter, floated up. “Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“It's been two days. He should at least eat. I'm gonna go make something.”

Despite how hard he kept his eyes shut, it didn't stop the tears from forcing their way down his cheeks. They were worried about him? After everything he'd put them through? A gasping sob slipped out and he bit his tongue, hard. He couldn't risk them hearing.

“He'll come down when he's ready.” He could practically hear Tom put his arm around Maddie. “C'mon.”

The creaking floorboards signaled their departure, but relief didn't come. Just more tears.

It didn't make sense. He'd been so happy. Two days ago they'd tucked him in – *tucked him in!* – and he'd drifted off giggling, at long last excited to see what the next day would bring.

He hadn't gotten out of bed since.

His normally lighter-than-air frame felt like lead, and sure, he'd used a ton of power and energy over the last few days, but he'd never had trouble bouncing back before. Why couldn't he muster the strength to get up, go downstairs, see the people who'd given him his first real home in ten years?

Now they probably thought he was an asshole, taking their hospitality for granted.

They were probably right.

He curled tighter in on himself, the pillow wet and the air around him humid and hot. The tears only stopped when he drifted off, fitfully, some time later.

* * *

When he opened his eyes again the light pouring in from the skylight was a dark pink. He'd flailed the comforter off in his sleep and now he was cold. And sticky. Sweat made the fur cling to his body, made the sheets stick to his fur, and it was so uncomfortable he pushed himself up into a sitting position.

Everything was sore and his head felt fuzzy as he blinked around the room.

Through bleary eyes, he spotted it.

A plate.

Sitting right next to the drop-down stairs.

With a sandwich and chips and a bottle of water.

A sound came out of his mouth that was a strange mixture of a laugh and a sob and he swung his legs off of the bed. A couple of wobbly steps and he was sitting cross-legged on the floor. He had to force the first bite, but he inhaled the rest, then licked the crumbs from the plate and downed the water in one long continuous gulp.

As he put the bottle down his stomach – now slightly distended – gave a churning, gurgling sound and he groaned. Nature was calling.

The stairs lowered without much effort but more than enough noise to wake the dead. He cringed. So much for taking care of business undetected. He could hear footsteps and seriously considered pulling the ladder back up and climbing out the skylight, but then Maddie came into view. Her mouth was smiling but her eyes didn't sell it. “Hey you.”

“Uh, h-hey.” He slowly made his way down the stairs, eyes anywhere but on her. “Thanks, um, for-for lunch. I didn't mean to – I mean, I did, I guess – but if you were in the middle of something you can just got back to – but, um, before you do that, maybe you could point me in the direction of the men's room?” He twisted his gloved hands together, gaze on his socks.

If she shared his embarrassment, she didn't show it. “Around the corner, second door on the right.”

“Got it. Thanks. Again.” He tried to run, but his legs still felt too shaky, wouldn't do what he told them. Walking was the order of the day, apparently.

She didn't follow him. From behind the closed bathroom door he could hear her turn on the radio in the kitchen – news, from the sound of it – and he felt a little bit of the queasy tension leave his stomach.

The room was big – bigger than any truck stop bathroom he'd ever used (sometimes digging a hole in the woods just felt a little too *animal* and he'd given doing things the human way a try) and cleaner too. As he was pulling off his gloves to wash his hands, his eyes kept darting over to the tub. He'd never taken a bath before. He'd tried the shower at the motel and that was fine – like a rain storm that just happened to be scalding – but kind of boring. In the woods being clean hadn't really been a priority. When it rained, he ran around in it, and that was that. He hadn't been a fan of the ocean. But the tub...looked inviting.

Cautiously, curiously, he drew closer. It seemed straightforward enough. One handle had a little 'h' on it, the other a 'c'. He twisted the 'h' handle.

Instantly a spray of unexpectedly cold water dropped down on him from over his head. Yelping, he jerked back and looked up. Instead of from the faucet, the water was coming from the shower head up above. “Aw, come on!”

“Everything ok in there?”

Maddie's voice at the door had him squeaking again, face hot as he scrambled to shut off the water. “Oh yeah! Totally fine! Nothing to see...” The door opened. “...here. H-hey again.” He managed a weak smile as he turned to face her, water dripping from his flattened ears.

The woman he'd only thought of as 'Pretzel Lady' for years didn't look upset at the mess. Her eyes narrowed as she took in the scene, but the corner of her mouth twitched upwards as she said, “The hot and cold water are reversed.”

“Huh?”

“For the shower. That's what happens when you've got a husband who thinks watching a YouTube video means he's 'practically an expert'. You get a house full of quirks.”

“Uh, right.”

She turned and opened a door, reached in and pulled out a fluffy white towel that looked new. “You get the hang of it though.” She set the towel down on top of the closed toilet seat. “Want me to show you?”

“Oh, um, no. I mean, not, like, *no* 'no', but I can just–” He put a hand on the towel. “Clean up the mess. Get out of your hair. No big deal.” His gaze fell on the tub again and he bit his bottom lip.

Maddie considered him for a moment. He seemed so much smaller now, socked feet shuffling on the tile, ears flat against his head. Was this really the same creature who'd knocked out power to most of the northwestern US? Deep down in her chest something ached. Tom had gone to work – the late shift at the station today – so it was just her and their new house guest.

No, that wasn't right. An orphan alien who'd lived in a cave on the outskirts of town, who could travel faster than the speed of sound, who'd roped her husband (and her) into a death-defying chase across three states...well, 'house guest' didn't exactly do it justice. He'd called them his 'best friends', but that didn't feel right either. She could remember coming onto Main St, seeing him crawling away from that...that monster. The way her heart had launched itself up her throat, she'd been so afraid for him, had felt so helpless.

She felt helpless in this moment as well, but in a different way. It had been her idea to invite him to stay with them, but maybe it had been too much change too soon. He looked so uncomfortable, so unlike the bubbly, energetic hedgehog she thought she knew. But that was being presumptuous for sure. They'd only met less than a week ago. A connection was there, but it was tenuous, fragile.

“The only thing you're keeping me from is a sink full of dishes.” A few steps closer and she reached past him to plug the drain, switch the faucet from 'shower' to 'bath' mode, and twist the nozzle marked 'c'. “C'mon, lets get you cleaned up.”

Sonic blinked, watching as she sat herself on the wall of the tub. “Huh?”

“Put your hand under there.” She pointed at the stream of water. “Is that too hot?”

Warily he did as she instructed, then pulled his bare hand back with a wince. “Maybe a little.”

She gave the 'h' nozzle a twist, put her own hand under the faucet. “How 'bout now?”

He tried again, let the warm water run up his forearm. “Yeah.”

“All right. That's gonna take a few minutes to fill up.” She leaned back on the heel of her palm, lips pursed. “We don't really have any toys or anything...oh! Hang on.”

His brow furrowed, eyes following her. “I don't need–I'm not a little–what're you looking for?”

“Something I've been saving since my bridal shower.” She was back at the little closet, looking for all intents and purposes like she might be trying to find Narnia for how far in she was leaning. “I hope I didn't throw them away last time I was cleaning out the – ah ha! Here we go!” She reemerged with what looked like a plastic-wrapped ball of chalk in one hand.

He merely quirked one ear up at her.

She grinned. Coming back to the tub, she unwrapped the ball and offered it to him. “Drop it in.”

The thing in his hand was blue with pink and green swirls marbled through it. It smelled – he brought it up to his nose – like the wildflowers that grew along the riverbank in the summer. He snorted, surprised. The humans kept managing to do that – surprise him. With a shrug, he held it out over the half-full tub and let it fall into the water.

Whatever he'd been expecting it to do, it wasn't this. The immediate fizzing and bubbling and just how quickly it filled the tub with a rainbow of suds had him letting out a tiny delighted gasp. He leaned over to watch more closely. The wildflower smell was growing stronger, rising up around him with the steam. “What the heck is that thing?”

“It's called a 'bath bomb'.” Maddie retook her seat on the edge of the tub.

“That checks out.”

She laughed softly and shut off the water. “It's been collecting dust in the closet for years. I don't usually make time for baths.”

He nodded slowly. “...yeah, me neither.”

“Well, no time like the present.”

He stood, hands on the lip of the tub, eyes on the water, for a long moment. “So you just...what? Hop in?”

“Pretty much. Might wanna take your socks off first.”

“Right, right, yeah, duh.” He was already kicking them away. “Ok. Here goes nothin'.” In one smooth motion he hoisted himself up and over the edge, landing with a small splash in the basin. Standing, the water already reached his waist and as he sank down instinctively, it rose up over his shoulders, enveloping him like a frothy, colorful, sweet-smelling cocoon. The low, throaty laugh that passed his lips wasn't planned and he felt his muzzle warm even as he worked his more confident smirk back into place as cover. “Yeah, I guess this is better than the pacific.”

“I should hope so.” Maddie grinned. She dipped her hands into the water, came up with a pile of soft blue bubbles and let them fall on top of his head. Careful to work with the grain so as not to get pricked, she began working her fingers through his quills. He made a confused noise and she pulled back. “D'you mind? Sorry, should've asked first.”

“No I guess not.” He shrugged, shoulders appearing and then disappearing beneath the suds just as quickly. “You're the one who knows what you're doing.”

“A little bit anyway.” She resumed her work, thinking about how it was sort of like giving Ozzie a bath and simultaneously how vastly different it was. One only-somewhat-surprising similarity was discovered unintentionally when she went to scrub behind his ears and he gave a whole-body shudder.

It was immediately followed by a high-pitched, nervous laugh and then the hedgehog dunked himself fully underwater, resurfacing at the other end of the tub, slicking his quills back and not making eye contact. “Who made *that* embarrassing noise? Not *this* guy, that's for sure. Must've been some totally *un*cool kid passing by the window just now. Like maybe a baby or something,” he rambled, sinking lower until his words were merely bubbles rising in front of his nose.

“Sonic...” Maddie said gently.

She got only bubbles in response.

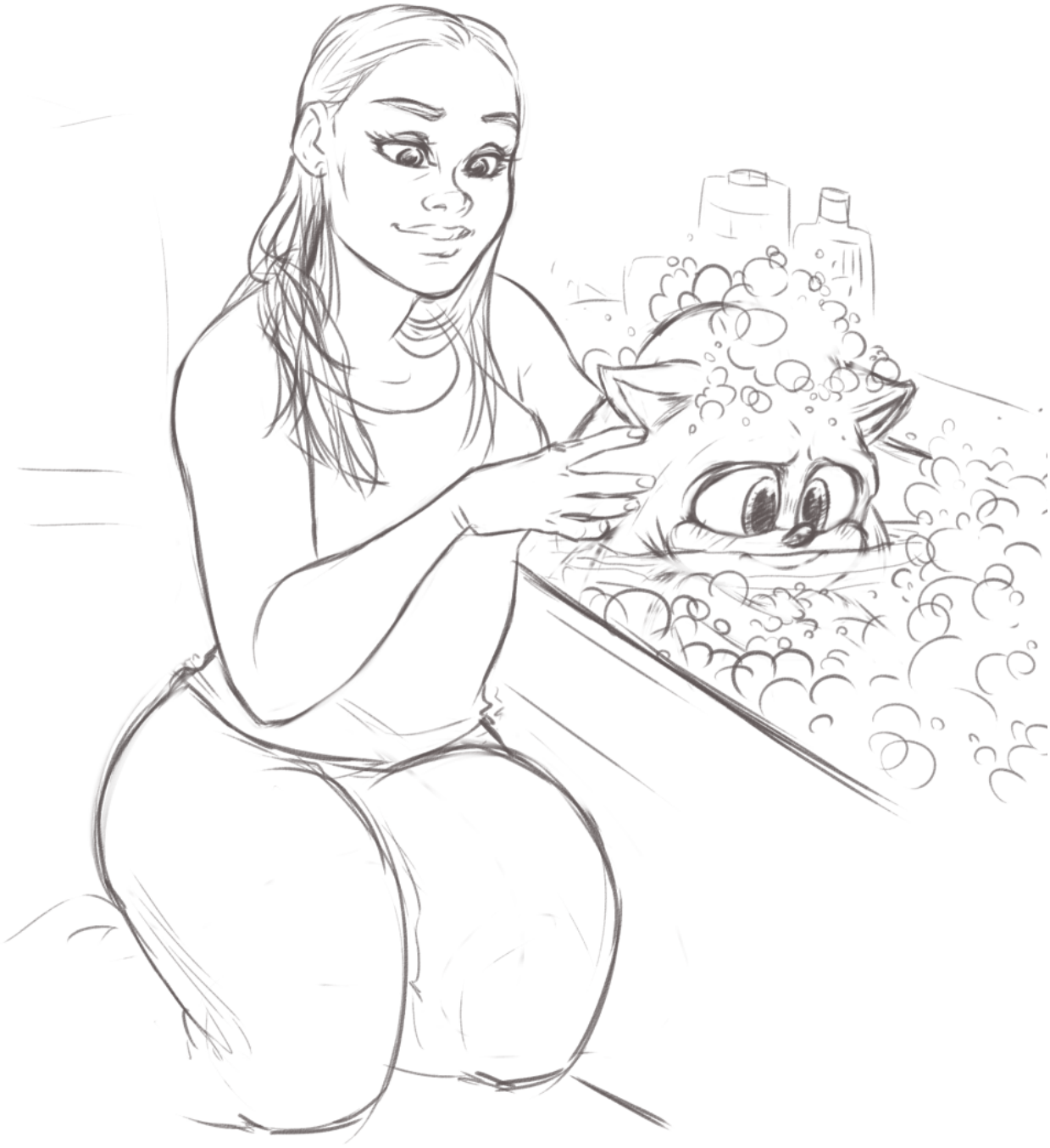
“Do you like getting your ears rubbed?”

He raised his head up just enough to mumble, “Apparently.”

Sympathy tinged her smile. Of course this discovery was new to him too. When would he have had the opportunity to learn it before this moment? “If it makes you uncomfortable, I promise I won't do it anymore. I *would* like to get some of the dirt out of your quills though. If that's all right.”

He fully submerged again, reappearing back at her side. “Yeah ok.” He drew his knees up, wrapping both arms around them. “You won't...you won't tell Tom, will you?”

“Not if you don't want me too.” She scooped up two more handfuls of bubbles and set back to work. “Though I don't think there's anything to be ashamed of. It's ok to like being touched.”



Sonic was quiet, watching the colors in the water move lazily around him. Her fingers in his quills were soothing, carding away the grime. She paused to pick out a larger piece of debris and he froze.

He'd felt this before. Years ago – a lifetime ago – but it had been a beak, not fingers, plucking leaves and grass from his fur. Preening.

His chest felt tight all over again.

Maddie felt him go rigid, waited for him to tell her to stop, but instead the sound of quiet sniffling reached her ears and her heart broke clean in half. “Hey...hey, it's ok.” Her voice was soft, as were her hands, still rhythmically moving. “Do you want me to go?”

He shook his head, not trusting himself to speak, glad she was behind him.

“All right. I'm gonna keep working then. You just breathe, ok? With me, ok? In through the nose and out through the mouth. In through the nose and out through the mouth.”

He recognized the phrase from her Saturday morning yoga videos. He'd always been so busy trying to bend himself in ways a hedgehog clearly wasn't meant to, he'd never bothered to try the breathing thing. He did now, listening to her inhale and exhale, focusing on matching her languid pace.

The first few exhales were shaky, mortifyingly tainted with whimpers and gasps, but after ten or fifteen repetitions...it started to work. He could feel the tightness in his chest lessen, the muscles in his back relaxed. “Huh,” he muttered. “Guess that wasn't all just BS after all.”

Maddie smiled with relief. She'd been acting on instinct, going with her gut. Her gut had been the right way to go, apparently. “I'll never BS you, kiddo. Promise.”

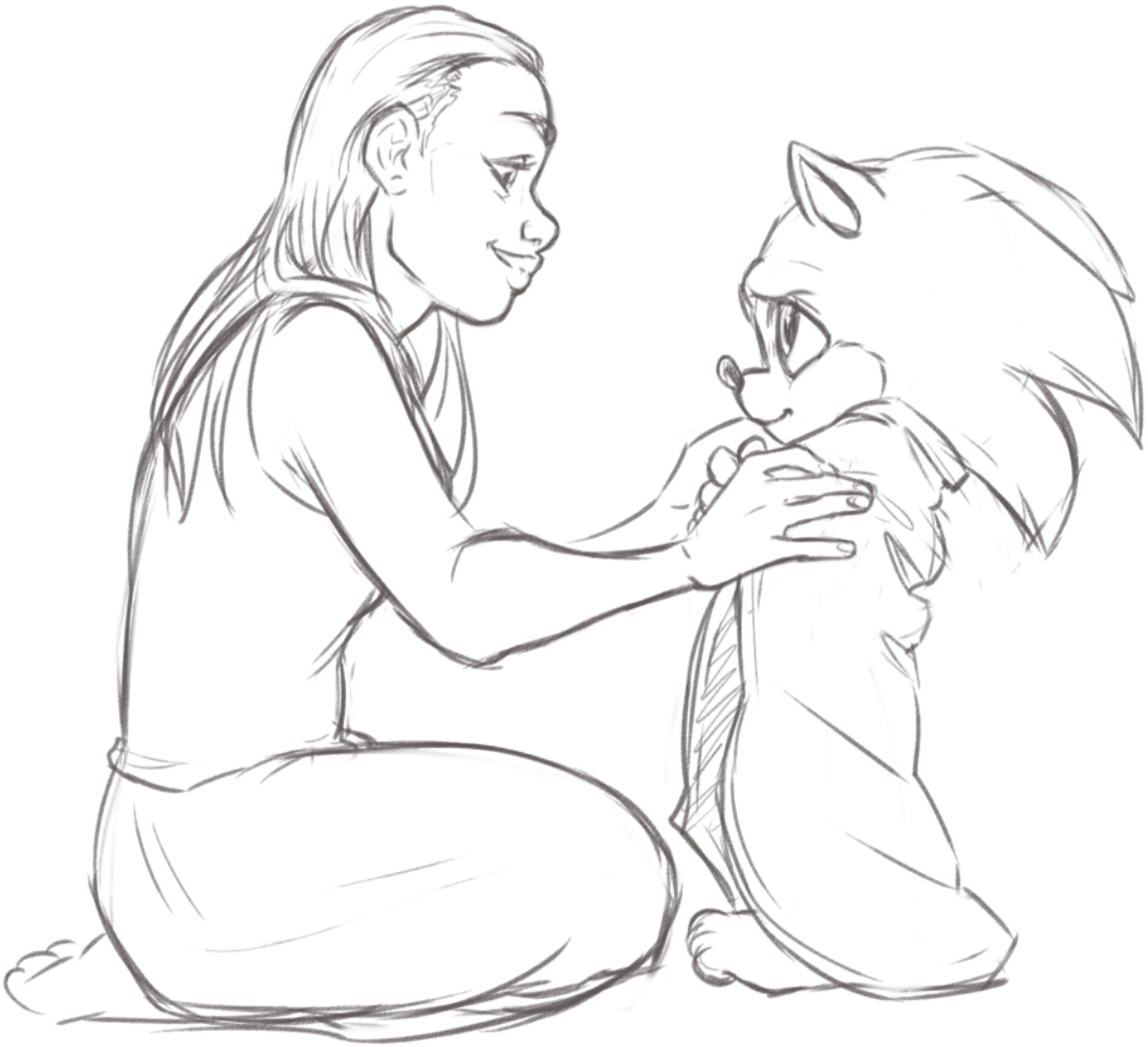
He chuckled. “I'll hold you to that.”

The water started to cool down soon after and so Maddie showed him which switch to flip to drain the tub, and then how to switch it back to 'shower' mode, which she used to rinse off the suds that were still clinging to his fur. He stepped out of the tub and started to shake dry, but she quickly threw the towel over him, bundling him up before he could make another mess. “Not so fast, mister. That's an out-in-the-yard-only move.”

“Buzzkill.” He stuck out his tongue at her, but then she was rubbing him dry and through the thick towel her fingers hit a spot just under his ribcage and he jerked back with a laugh. “Hey hey! No tickling a guy when he's not ready!”

“My bad.” She was on her knees, closer to eye level, smiling at him as she worked the towel over his quills. “Won't happen again.”

“Good.” He gave her a mock-stern look so she knew he meant business, and then his expression softened. She was as methodical in drying him as she'd been cleaning him – and just as gentle. No wonder Tom and Ozzie both lit up whenever she got home. With the towel clutched around his shoulders, he tried to put on his familiar, confident smirk, but his mouth only made it as far as a shy smile as he mumbled, “But maybe you could rub my ears again sometime?”



She tried to stop herself from cooing – he really was too damn cute for his own good – as she squeezed his shoulders. “Anytime, kiddo.” She chucked his chin with a loose fist and then stood. “Whadda ya say we go get dinner ready?”

“You read my mind.” He nodded, feeling his stomach rumble at the mere mention of more food. “I'm just gonna go grab clean socks and I'll be right there.”

“Sounds like a plan.” She ruffled the fur on the top of his head, gave one ear a quick rub before dropping her hand back to her side and turning to leave.

Face warm, chest swelling with something he couldn't quite name, his mouth moved of it's own accord. “Mo-Maddie?”

“Hmm?” She twisted back around.

“Thanks. For everything. Really.”

Her smile was twice as warm as the bath. “Like I said – anytime, kiddo. See you in a minute. And no 'Tom Cruisin' in the hallway.”

“Aw, whaaa?? Seriously? Buzz. Kill. For realz.”

“Rules are rules.” She smirked as she strode off towards the kitchen.

“Lame!” he called after her, smiling widely.

Chapter End Notes

Updated 4/14/20 to include illustrations by the wonderful https://thebigpalooka.tumblr.com/

The Second Time

Chapter Summary

In which Sonic tags along car-shopping with Tom.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Second Time

“Ya know, for a place that's literally over an acre of vehicles, absolutely *nothing* is moving around here.”

Tom continued his leisurely meander down the rows of cars, trucks and SUVs at Big Willie's Used Car Lot. “I told you you didn't have to tag along.”

At his side, Sonic strolled with both hands folded behind his quills. “Yeah, but I figured that was 'cause you were gonna go do something fun. Do we even get to drive any of these? Where's the test track?”

The sheriff chuckled. “When I find something I like, *I* will take it for a test drive, yes. But just around town – at the speed limit. No Tokyo drifting today, bud.”

The hedgehog let out an indignant huff. “Seriously?”

“'Fraid so.”

“Leave it to grown ups to take something as cool as *buying a **car*** and make it boring and lame.” Sonic kicked at the gravel, pouting. “Why not just get the same truck you had before?”

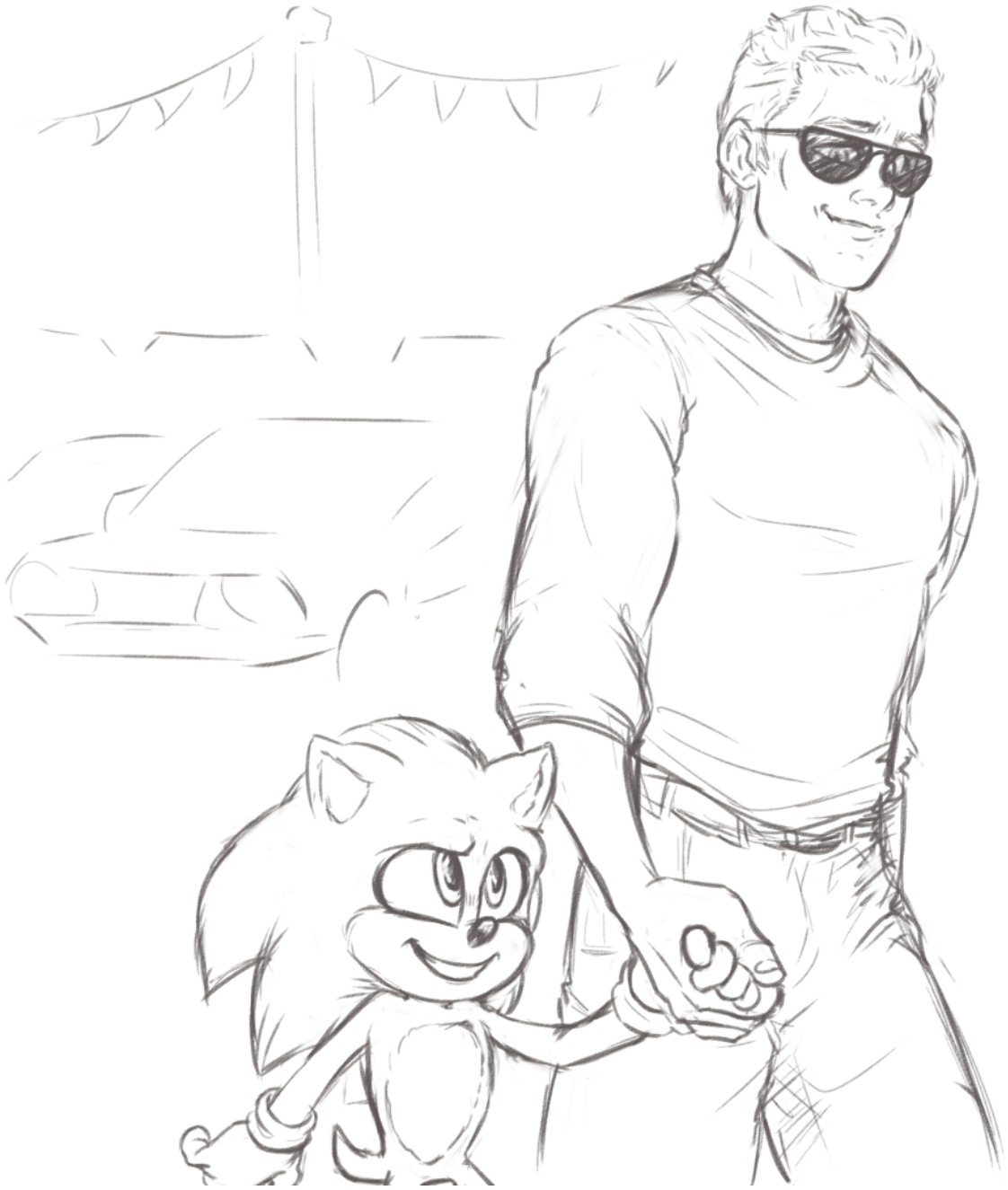
Tom slipped his hands into the back pockets of his jeans as he slowed to look at a 2-door pick-up not unlike the one he'd totaled while they'd been on the run from that government maniac. “...yeah, I dunno. I'm just not feelin' it.”

The teen turned his attention out over the lot, frowning. “Ugh, I can't see anything from down here. Hang on a sec.” With a small burst of speed he scaled the lamppost in the center of the lot, perching up above the lights and the colored flags that hung still in the breeze-less August air.

“H-hey! Get down from there!” Tom called, squinting behind his aviators, one hand forming a visor at his forehead.

“I said 'one sec'!” Sonic hollered back down, attention out at the far end of the lot. After a moment that was too long for Tom's liking, the boy grinned, and zipped back down the pole. “C'mon, over

on the side by Third Street – it's perfect!" He reached up and grabbed Tom's hand, tugging excitedly.



The 45-year-old let himself be led, a bemused smile on his face. The kid was getting a little bolder, a little less shy when it came to things like this – physical affection. When they'd first moved him in, he'd kept his distance, hovering around them but not touching.

And then, maybe two weeks after the move, something shifted.

He'd been sitting at the kitchen island, sipping a beer while Maddie made grilled cheese. Sonic had come into the room, sidled up beside her at the stove and pushed his head into her free hand. Maddie had responded by rubbing his ears, and he'd in turn leaned further in, hooking one hand around her leg. Tom had watched them, dumbfounded. The two of them looked so naturally contented, chatting idly all while she continued to pet him.

The first thing he'd felt after the initial surprise had been jealousy. It wasn't fair, or logical even, but he'd felt it all the same. He'd asked Maddie about it later that night, as they got ready for bed.

"So when did this happen?"

"When did what happen?"

Tom folded down the comforter, picked up his pillow and then set it back down again. "This whole...snuggly thing you two have going on."

Maddie didn't bother looking up from massaging lotion into her hands. "What? He likes it when I rub his ears."

"Yeah, I picked up on that."

She glanced up at him, quirking an eyebrow. "Are you for real right now with that tone?"

He sighed, big and dramatic as he plunked himself down on the bed. "Noooo...and yes."

His wife leaned back into her pillows (three to his one), hands folded in her lap, ankles crossed. "What's going on, hmm?"

*" I dunno..." He ran a hand over his face as he worked to articulate his thoughts. "It's fine – it's good! Really, it is. It's **so** good to see him...like that."*

"Like a kid."

"Yes, absolutely. It's what he needs."

"...but?"

*"But why can he do that with **you** when all I'm getting are high fives?"*

Maddie smiled, reached over and took hold of his hand. "I don't know, babe. Maybe it's a guy-girl thing? Maybe he thinks high fives are just what guys do. Keanu Reeves doesn't exactly do a lot of hugging on screen."

"We should probably force him to watch other movies soon," Tom muttered, though both of them knew that wasn't really the point at hand. "How'd you even figure out the ear thing?"

"Kind of by accident, actually. I was giving him a bath and–"

*"Wait – he let you give him a **bath?** "*

"On nights you work the late shift, yeah."

The noise he made could best be described as the call of an agitated cockatiel. "This is a regular thing?"

"Babe." She laughed, squeezed his hand. "Will you relax?"

"I – you – he – what? It's like you guys have this whole...secret mother-son ritual and–"

"And?"

*“And **I** want that!” The thought hadn't been solid until it had come out of his mouth but nothing had been truer since their wedding vows. He let out a long exhale, let the fact settle around his shoulders, as a tiny smile tugged at his cheeks. “I want to... to hug him when I get home from work. Have him ride on my shoulders to watch the Homecoming Parade. I want him to hang on my leg like he did with you tonight. I want...I want to be his dad.”*

Maddie scooted in closer, hugging his arm. “It's kinda weird, right?”

*“ **Very** weird,” he admitted. Kids, as a concept, had never exactly been off the table, but the agreement they'd come to was 'when we're ready, we'll talk about it'. But then there'd been vet school and second jobs and **third jobs** and working opposite shifts and life in general and when they celebrated her 40 th birthday in January he'd figured that the window of opportunity had closed. Nothing had been discussed back then. T hey'd just carried on as usual, never expecting this alien teenager to come crashing straight through that closed window. He laughed quietly and let his cheek rest against his wife's head, breathing her in . “ But in a good way.”*

“Oh for sure.” Quiet fell over the room and then she added. “Sorry I didn't tell you about the ear thing. He asked me not to.”

“What? Why?”

“I dunno, babe, maybe 'cuz he's fourteen. He watches too many action movies and doesn't want you to tease him or think he's a baby.”

“I'd never–”

“ I know, but he's got these hangups anyway. I, apparently, come with less baggage around my neck, so, even though he was embarrassed at first, he's worked through it. You noticed I didn't say anything about it though, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Cuz if I do, he gets shy about it again and backs off. As long as I just do it and don't call any attention to it, it's all good.”

“Huh.”

“ I'm just meeting him where he needs me to be. It's trial and error, believe me. But it's progress.”

Tom nodded. At the foot of the bed, Ozzie snorted in his sleep.

So he'd been patient, been present, been available, and had added more family movies with affectionate fathers into the movie night mix (The Incredibles and Field of Dreams had been big hits). And, if this particular moment was any indication, it was starting to pay off.

They came to a stop in front of a Dodge Challenger and Sonic released his hand in order to wave both of his at the vehicle with a flourish, “Ta-da! Beautiful, right? She's perfect!”

“Maybe if you're Vin Diesel.”

“Oh come *on!*” A bit of a whine bled into Sonic's voice as he circled the car, eyes shining. “Think of how much fun we could have in this thing!”

“How much trouble we could get into, you mean.”

“To-may-to, to-mah-to.”

Tom moved in closer, peering in the driver's side window. “There's only two seats.”

“How many more do you need?”

Through the car on the other side, Tom could barely see the top of Sonic's ears, and a thought that had been percolating leading up to this trip suddenly solidified. “Well, how many family members to we have?” He watched the ears droop and took the few steps needed to move to the passenger side of the car, where Sonic was fiddling with his gloves. He hooked his thumbs in his front pockets and answered his own question. “Because from where I'm standing we've got four. Maddie, me, Ozzie...and you.”

“Oh.” Sonic let out a small, nervous chuckle. “R-right. I knew that.” He ran a hand through his quills, eyes on the car, on the sky, on his shoes, as he kept talking. “That's a lie. I didn't know that. I mean, sure you guys let me live with you and feed me and stuff but best friends do that stuff too, right? I remember Wade crashing on your couch a while back and he was way messier than I am I think. He didn't get his own room or anything but – I dunno what that has to do with anything. Is it getting hot out here? Am I still talking? I feel like I'm still talking. I should probably stop, right? Please stop me.”

“Sonic, take a breath, will you?” Tom crouched down so they were more at eye level. The kid looked like he might be sick, like someone really *had* cranked the heat up in the parking lot. But as Tom watched, the little blue alien started yoga breathing. *'Something he picked up from Maddie.'* He reached out, rested a hand on a skinny shoulder. “You ok?”

A little nod. “I think so.” Another deep breath. “That's just a...a *really* big word.”

“I guess it can be, yeah. But it's one I've been thinking about a lot lately. Because while I love Wade like a brother, I'm not wandering around a used car lot wondering if I'll ever need to carpool him to baseball practice.”

Sonic started picking at the cuffs of his gloves, a tiny smirk on his muzzle. “Yeah, that'd be kinda awkward. Wait – can I sign up for–?”

“In the Spring, if you want to. Let's worry about school first. And a practical car.” He got back to his feet, offered the boy his hand. “You're gonna want Maddie and Ozzie to tag along with us sometimes, right?”

Without hesitation, Sonic took the offered hand, fell in step as they hiked back towards the decidedly un-fast-and-furious cars. “Well yeah. Maddie's the best. And Ozzie's ok, sometimes, I guess.”

“Jealous much?”

“What? Me? Nooooo, no no no, nope, no way, only I've been meaning to ask, what's up with the double standard?”

“Hmm?”

“Dogs get to sleep in your bed, but not hedgehogs?”

“You don't need to be let outside to pee.”

“Excuses, excuses.”

“I thought you liked your bed.”

“No, I do. But Ozzie has his own bed in the kitchen too.”

“Yeah, but he doesn't run in his sleep.”

“I don't – how would you even–?”

“We check on you before we turn in.”

“Like a couple of creepers?”

“Like a couple of parents.”

The gloved hand in his squeezed a little tighter and the teen was quiet for a long moment. “Nother big word there,” he finally mumbled.

“Well 'roommates' doesn't seem to cut in, in my opinion.” Tom slowed his pace as they came upon a row of minivans. “You could be my ward, I guess. Like Dick Grayson to my Bruce Wayne.”

“In what universe are *you* Batman?” Sonic also slowed, following the sheriff's gaze. “And in what universe are *these* Batmobiles??”

Tom laughed at that. “In our universe. Or we could just start getting used to big words.” He felt another squeeze.

“Maybe.” A beat. A sigh. “You really gonna drive me around in one of these loser cruisers?”

“Yep. With a booster seat and everything.”

“A ***what?!***”

“You heard me. The only reason we haven't gotten a ticket yet for you riding in the front seat is because I'm the sheriff. But we're gonna start following the rules from now on.”

“But–”

“Not buts.”

“*You're* a butt,” Sonic grumbled, sounding every bit of his fourteen years.

“Watch it, mister.” Tom's smile betrayed his stern tone.

“Gaaaaaugh!” The hedgehog dragged his free hand down his face. “You're killin' me, Da-Donut Lord.”

Tom glanced down, peering over his sunglasses. Had he imagined that slip? Judging by the pink in the alien's muzzle, the continued rambling about 'losing my rep before I even get to have one', he didn't think so. He almost pointed it out, but Maddie's voice echoed in the back on his brain, *'I'm just meeting him where he needs me to be.'* So instead he just smiled and said, “What can I say? That's what Donut Lord's do best.”

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to say a quick thank you to everyone who's reading and leaving kudos and commenting - you guys have been making my week! I'm going to be posting updates as soon as their done (no backlog here, heh) so I can't tell you when the next one will be, but I AM working on it!

Updated 4/14/20 to include illustrations by the wonderful https://thebigpalooka.tumblr.com/

The Third Time

Chapter Summary

In which Sonic has a not-so-great day at school.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Third Time

3:05 PM. Maddie tapped the steering wheel mindlessly, eyes on the front doors of Green Hills Middle School. She'd heard the bell ring. It shouldn't be long now.

The windows were rolled down, letting in air that was unseasonably warm for Montana in October. Depending on his mood, maybe she'd suggest going for a run. It was Thursday, which meant Tom was working the late shift, so it'd just be the two of them. With the days getting shorter and a cold snap in the forecast for the weekend, getting out and enjoying the afternoon seemed like a good idea. But again, that would all depend on his mood.

School was starting to feel like a crap-shoot. Some afternoons he bounded down the stone steps, bursting at the seams to tell her about absolutely everything from the cafeteria menu to the trophy case he'd saved from a wayward football. Other days...

The doors swung open and her face fell. Looked like today was going to be another 'other day'. He was never hard to spot – a blue alien hedgehog in amongst a crowd of human teenagers – but on better days sometimes he'd try to surprise her, zipping past the crowd and appearing in the back seat of the SUV before she'd even started to open the door. Today he walked. Walking was never a good sign. He only walked when he had to – or when he wasn't in the mood to run.

She put on a smile and pressed the button on the center console that opened the back door. “Hey, kiddo.”

“Hey.” He stood on the curb, glowering at the back passenger seat.

The booster.

She knew he hated it. She'd been the one he'd come running to when Tom had brought them home (one for her car, one for his). He'd pleaded, begged, lamented animatedly about the great injustice and indignity of it. He was invulnerable, he shouldn't have to follow rules meant for human children. He hadn't liked it at all when she pointed out that he wasn't invincible, and that maybe Tom had a point. He'd stormed up to his room, hollering that they were “the absolute ***worst***” before pulling the ladder up with such force that it rattled the light fixtures.

They had exchanged wan smiles and comments like 'You feel like a parent yet?' and consoled themselves with the fact that they were doing their best and that he would come around.

And he did come around – sort of – later that night, after skipping dinner.

“ Did we finish the last season of 'Man in the High Castle'?” Tom asked, remote in hand.

Beside him on the couch, Maddie tucked her feet up on the cushions. “Yeah I think so.”

“Ok...what did we want to start ne–” A rush of air and a blur of blue in his peripheral vision stopped him mid-sentence and they both turned. From the kitchen, they could hear the fridge being pulled open. He moved to stand, but she put a hand on his arm.

A moment later, the blur zipped past them again. Tom craned his neck, and Maddie squeezed his arm. “Maybe he's not ready to–” she'd started, but then the blur reappeared, solidifying in the doorway as a sullen-looking teenager.

“What're you guys watching?” he asked, eyes on the TV instead of on them.

“Hadn't decided yet.” Tom patted the spot next to him on the couch. “Any requests?”

The boy didn't move, or at least not forward. He fidgeted in place, muttering to himself (with himself) before saying quietly, “I think Netflix was s'posed to have a new Pokemon movie or something...”

Maddie leaned forward, smiled when she managed to catch his eye. “That sounds good to me.”

He slowly shuffled into the living room, moving around the coffee table to climb up on Maddie's side of the couch. As she shifted, letting him snuggle up against her, she caught Tom's poorly-hidden frown out of the corner of her eye. A little pang of pain twinged in her chest. She brushed her fingers against his leg as on the other side of her Sonic was pushing his head into her hand, signaling what he wanted. She obliged, rubbing his ears and taking the opportunity to speak up while Tom queued up the movie. “We're not trying to 'ruin your life', you know.”

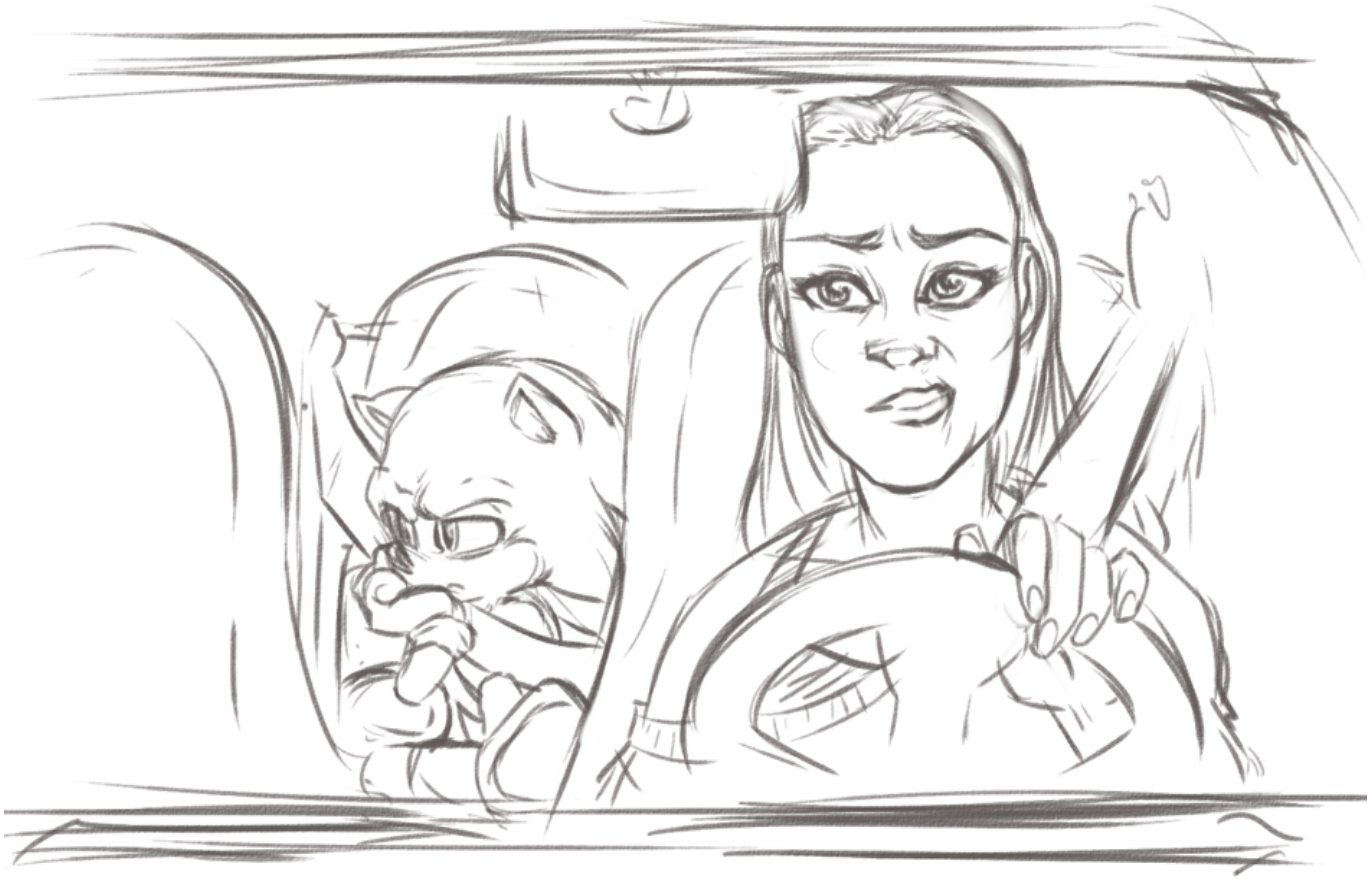
Sonic's muzzle flushed pink, but he didn't pull away. “Yeah, I know,” he mumbled.

They didn't speak much more during the movie, only occasionally when something on screen didn't make sense and the teen had to explain it (which truthfully left the adults even more confused).

And that was where they'd left this particular subject. Him not liking it but putting up with it anyway. He heaved his backpack in first and stepped in after it, pulling the door shut before climbing up and buckling himself in. Then he propped his elbow on the armrest and let his chin fall into his hand. “All set, Pretzel Lady.”

She started the engine and made her way out of the parking lot. “How, um, how was school?”

“Fine.”



'Damn it.' She'd been a teenager (ages ago, it seemed). She knew what 'fine' meant. 'Fine' meant no amount of fresh air was going to make this boy smile today. They wound their way through town in silence – or at least *near*-silence. Halfway home she could hear him whispering to himself. It was a habit, one born of years spent alone with no one but himself to talk to. When he'd first moved in it had been a bit jarring. They'd kept responding to questions not meant for them and she'd noticed he'd taken to lowering his volume when he did it. He couldn't stop – not yet anyway – but he was making an effort to be less obvious about it. So she tried to ignore it, most of the time. Alone in the car though, it was hard.

The word 'stupid' – hissed like venom – caught her attention as they pulled into the driveway and she frowned. “Who's stupid?”

His head snapped up, like he'd forgotten where he was, and he scowled. “I wasn't talking to you,” he snapped. In a blur of motion he was out of the car, up the side of the house and into his room through the skylight.

Maddie put the car in park, sighing. As she reached over to grab her purse from the passenger seat, she spotted his backpack still on the floor behind her. She pulled it into the front seat by one strap and noticed the front pocket was only half closed. There was a white envelope sticking out, which, on closer inspection was addressed to 'Mr. & Mrs. Wachowski'. “Uh oh.” She tore it open and unfolded the single sheet inside, scanning it quickly as realization dawned and her face fell. “Damn it.”

* * *

The knock on his door was entirely expected but Sonic still cringed. Lying on his stomach on his bed, he spoke into his pillow. “G'way!”

The stairs creaked and the footsteps echoed and Maddie's voice replied, “Yeah, that's not gonna happen.”

He didn't – couldn't - look at her. He knew she'd found it. She had to have found it. Why else would she have come up here? Usually when he needed time to cool off about something they gave him his space, but if she'd found it, if she knew... His eyes burned and he pressed his face further into the pillow, hoping against hope that she'd just give up and leave him alone.

Instead, “Sonic...”

He groaned, raised his head up just enough so he could glare bleary-eyed at the headboard. “Ya wanna know who's stupid, Maddie? ...***Me***.” His voice cracked as he said it, just to add insult to injury.

“I don't want to hear you say that again.”

“Why not?” The words were like acid in his mouth. “You've got the proof right there in your hand.”

She came up beside the bed. “Can I sit?”

“You sure you want to? Some of the stupid might rub off.”

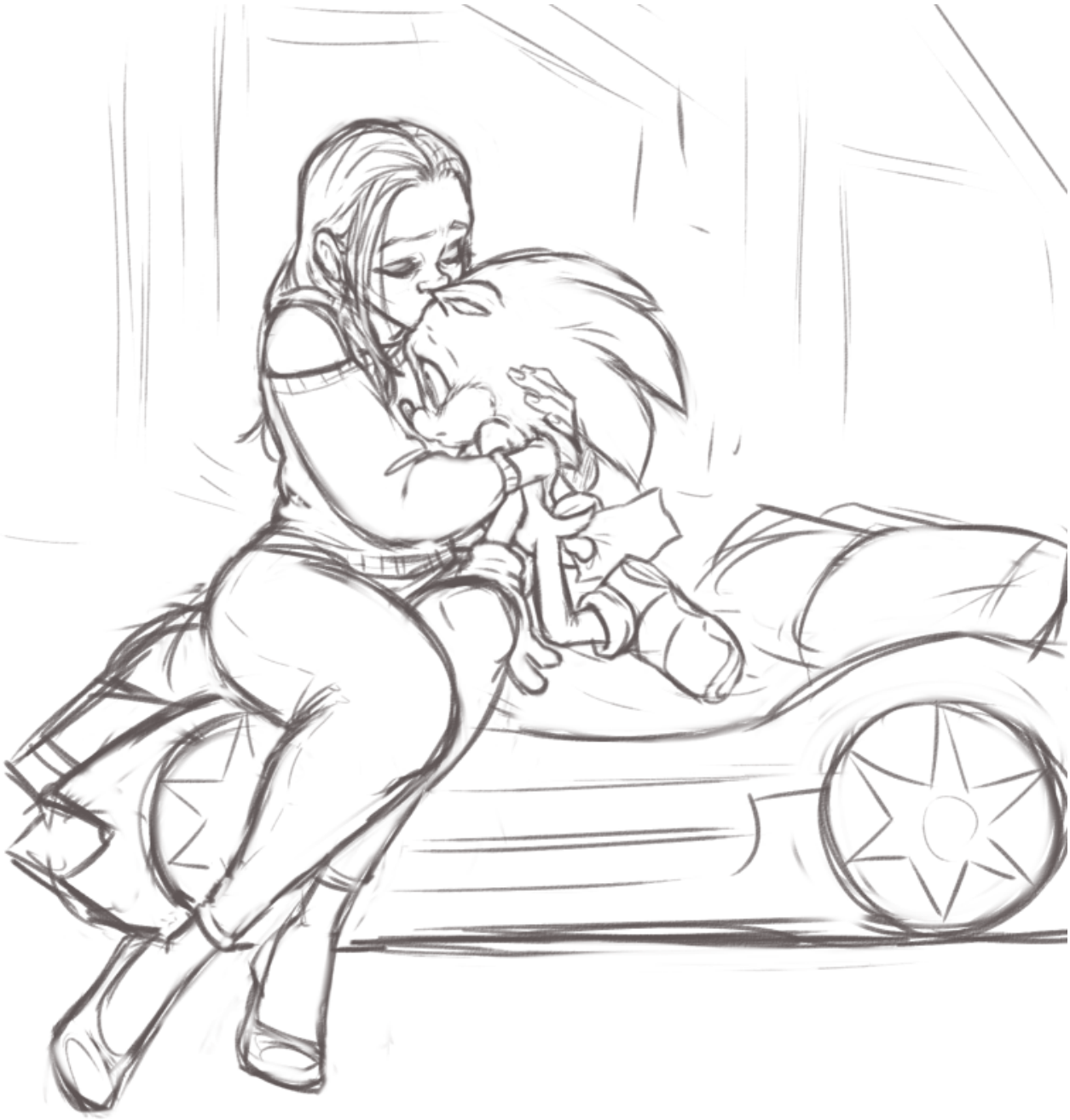
She sat. “I said knock it off with that.” She held out the piece of paper and he flinched away from it. “All I've got here is a letter that says–”

He sprang up, snatched it away from her. “Remedial Math, Maddie. They wanna put me in *Remedial* Math. That's code for stu–”

“Hey!” It was her turn to snap and it took him by enough surprise that he fell back on his tail on the bed. “Say that word one more time and so help me...” She stopped, closed her eyes and started to breath, long and deep. He sat, waiting, wet eyes wide and heart pounding. He'd never seen her mad before, not like this. What was she even mad about? He thought she would've been mad about his being, you know...a failure. But that didn't seem to be it. When she opened her eyes again the fire had gone out but he found he couldn't relax. “I'm sorry.”

“What for?” His fist clenched around the letter. “You're not the one who–”

Before he could finish his sentence, she was gathering him up in her arms, pulling him in tight. Stunned, he didn't even think to try pulling away, arms limp at his sides, the letter still tight in one hand. His face was pressed against her sweater and her scent – lavender soap and mountain air – surrounded him. He could feel her heartbeat against his cheek, her breath on his ears. Then something soft and warm pressed against the top of his head and it took him a minute to figure out what she was doing.



Kissing him.

Over and over she kissed him between the ears – a sensation so new and foreign and wonderful and *he didn't deserve it.* The world went blurry around the edges and he let the crumpled paper fall to the bed, lifting shaking hands up to clutch at her shirt. He opened his mouth but only a whimper came out so he clamped it shut again.

One of her hands went to his quills, stroking gently, and the mouth still so close to his fur whispered, “It's ok, baby. It's ok.”

His heart lurched so forcefully he thought it might come up his throat. He should've been mad – he kind of wanted to be. He wasn't a baby, but then again here he was bawling in her arms, so maybe he was. What was it about her that made it so easy to cry? He never used to. After the first few days on earth he'd made a concerted effort not to. Ten years of hard work building up the walls and all this woman had to do was hug him and kiss him – something no one had ever done *ever* ***before ever*** – and it all came tumbling down. He really *was* a baby.

Her baby.

The thought was so startling he actually gasped. It came out more like a shaky, hiccuping sob and she tightened her grip, kissed him again. God, that felt nice. The swirling cyclone of horrible things he'd been thinking about himself all day suddenly collided with this new perplexing information and his stomach did a flip inside of him.

He was her baby. Which meant she was his...his...

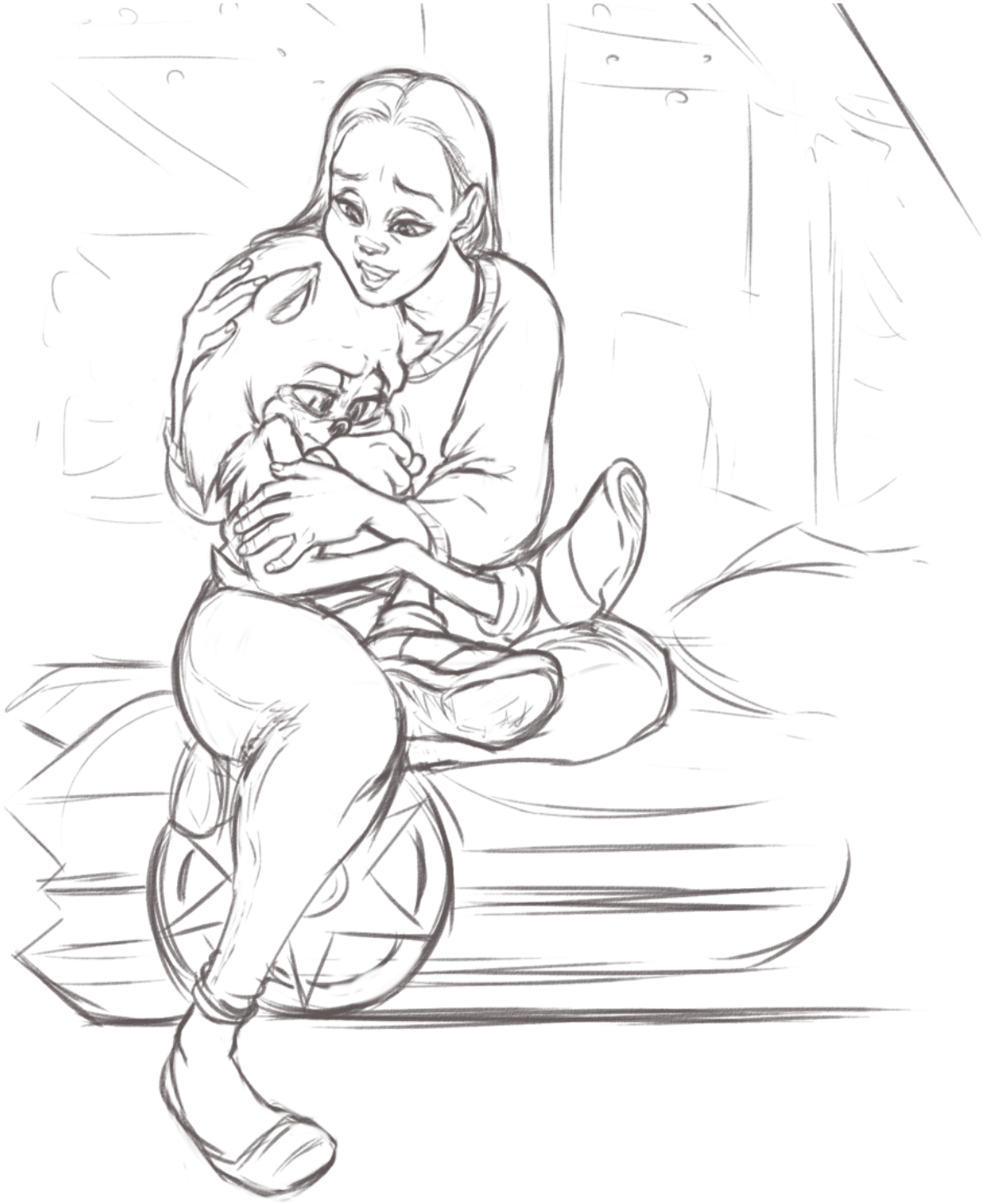
“Mo–” he choked out, hiding his face in her now-soaked sweater. “M-Mo–” The word caught in his throat.

“Shh shh shh.” Her soothing voice washed over him. “You're ok.”

But was he? He wrapped his arms around her as tightly as he could. “M'sorry.”

“Don't you dare be sorry.” Her tone was gentle but firm. “There's no reason for it.”

Then she was shifting them both, pulling him into her lap and he let her, content to be cradled while he worked to get his breathing back in sync with hers. With a sniff, he swiped at his nose with the back on his glove, not knowing what to say next.



She saved him the trouble, asking quietly. “Hey...who taught you to read?”

“Huh?”

“Who taught you to read?”

“Nobody.” He shrugged. “I hung out outside the elementary school windows a lot.” He gestured vaguely in the direction of the little camp-TV set they'd brought up from his cave. “Sesame Street helped.”

“You taught yourself to read. And write.”

“I guess.”

“Does that sound like somebody who's stupid to you?”

He blinked at his shoes. “Well, n-no I guess not, but the letter–”

“The letter says your teacher thinks you could use some extra help. Because you probably could.” She resumed stroking his quills. “Sonic, you've only been in school for a month. Every other kid has been doing it for eight years. And I'm going to guess that you won't be alone in that new math class. Because not everyone is great at everything.”

He snorted. “I used to be.”

Her hand found his cheek, tilted his face up towards hers. “*You* are absolutely amazing. But *no* one is perfect. So please, don't try to be.”

“That's ok?”

“More than ok.”

She leaned down just enough to plant a kiss on his nose and even as he blushed and squirmed and groaned (“C'maaaan...”) his heart swelled.

“Feeling better enough to be embarrassed now, hmm?”

He failed to fight a smile and nodded. “Thanks...” *'Mom! Mom! Mom!' “*...Maddie.” *'Coward.'*

“Anytime, kiddo.” She gave him another squeeze and he let her, in no hurry to be out of her lap. “So...I'm gonna take a wild guess that homework isn't what you want to be doing right now...” He made a face and she laughed. “How about we get some fresh air? Ozzie needs a walk. And I think we forgot about your after school snack. I've got guac in the fridge.”

“Snack and then walk?”

“You got it.”

He slipped his arms around her neck – this hugging thing was really the bees' knees – and squeezed before hopping back to the floor. “I'm actually kinda looking forward to my English homework,” he said as he moved towards the stairs.
“Yeah?” She followed after him, smiling.

“Yeah! We just started reading 'The Outsiders'!”

“Oh! That's a classic! You know they made a movie of it.”

“They did?”

“When you finish the book, we could find it to watch.”

“Cool, sure!” With a spring in his step, he led her back downstairs. In the back of his brain, the word 'mom' tumbled around, one more big word to mull over later. For now, though, for now there was guac.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who's reading and leaving kudos or comments! You all are making my day! I think I might actually finish this thing sooner than expected, mostly due to being stuck at home for the next week or more. Silver lining of the social distancing and school closures, I guess! Hope everyone is doing well and staying sane!

3/23/20 - Now with @thebigpalooka's AMAZING immustrations!

The Fourth Time

Chapter Summary

In which Tom drives Sonic to school.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Fourth Time

“C'mon slow poke, put today on it!” Sonic called, using a phrase he'd picked up from Maddie that made Tom grin as he hunched over on the bed, tying his work shoes. But instead of hurrying, he took his time, getting the loops in his laces perfectly even before crossing them. He could hear the hedgehog zipping back and forth down the hall (wearing a new groove in the hardwood, no doubt), knew the teen was peeking in the bedroom door, watching him in even slower motion than he was actually moving. At last, the blue blur came into focus in the door frame, one red shoe tapping against the wood floor. “You're trying to kill me. Is that it? Because it's working.”

Tom made sure his double knot was secure and then stood, rolling his shoulders. “Have we ever been late? Besides for orientation 'cause you chickened out and ran off?”

Sonic's foot stopped tapping, stomping down as he drew himself up to his full three-foot-four-inches. “I did *not* chicken out. I simply had other pressing matters to attend to that day.” Tom raised an eyebrow and Sonic's defiant expression melted into a pout. “Like having a mild panic attack.”

The sheriff's teasing expression melted into something more sympathetic. They could joke about it now (sort of), but it hadn't been funny at the time. What had begun as a morning marked by nervous excitement had turned into an all-hands-on-deck hedgehog hunt by 10 AM. When he'd gotten the call from Wade at noon about people seeing blue sparks flying at the baseball field, he'd actually put the sirens on and run the couple of red lights between him and his boy.

No reports of any power surges or outages had been filed , but the call had been right. From the parking lot he 'd clearly see n the sporadic bolts of blue electricity shooting up from under the bleachers. He had to remind himself to approach slowly, making his footsteps as loud as possible through the dirt. “Sonic? Buddy? You in there?”

A yelp sounded, followed by a stammering, “S-s-s-stay back!”

Tom came to a stop, a few feet away, squinting through his sunglasses at the shadowed, glowing form hiding under the stands. Not fully curled into a ball, but sitting in the dirt, hugging his knees, rocking back and forth. “I'm not going anywhere,” he called. “Just gonna stand right here, ok?”

Another squeak and a crackle of electricity. “I don't wanna hurt you! You should just – you should go.”

“If you think I'm leaving you here alone, you're sparkin' up the wrong tree, pal.”

*A gasp – almost a laugh – and the glow faded slightly. “That's **terrible** . You're terrible.”*

Tom shrugged, relief flooding his chest. “I liked it.” Puns to the rescue. “Can I come in?”

“Uh...yeah, I guess so.”

The sheriff made his way around to the side of the bleachers, crouching down as he stepped carefully underneath. In the darkened space he took off his aviators, hung them from his shirt collar, and let his eyes adjust.

Sonic was tucked under the lowest bench, still hugging his knees, eyes downcast. “Give it to me straight, Donut Lord – how much trouble am I in?”

“Hmmm.” Tom sat back on his haunches, elbows resting on his knees. “Truancy, public disturbance, scaring the crap out of Maddie and me...I'd say five months jail time. But with good behavior, overcrowding, that's really more like two months, tops.” The boy raised his head up, horror-struck, and Tom stifled a laugh. “Jesus, kid, your face. I'm joking.”

Sonic's brow furrowed, a few errant sparks climbing across his quills. “S'not funny.”

“Bad time to joke, fair, fair.” Tom raised a hand up in surrender. “ Serious time then?”

A nod. “Please.”

*“You're not in any trouble. But I **would** like to know what all this is about.”*

The teen tried to smirk. “What? The uncontrollable electricity? Totally normal space hedgehog stuff. Probably puberty or something.”

“Thought we were being serious, Sonic.”

The smirk faded, blue shoulders slumped. “Right.”

Tom shifted into a more comfortable position, not minding the dirt on his khakis as he sat down. “This whole weekend all you could talk about was school – we thought you were excited for this. Then we pull into the parking lot and...” He snapped his fingers. “You were gone. Nobody knew where – and knowing you, it could've been all the way to Mexico.” His voice softened, his eyes suddenly tired. “You really scared us.”

Sonic let one hand fall to his side, drawing circles in the dirt with his index finger. “Didn't mean to.”

Tom searched the boy's face. “ So what happened?”

*“I...I dunno...” Sonic started, then shook his head. “That's a lie. I should stop lying. I'm awful at it. I **was** excited about school. I've only been watching the other kids go for, like, my whole life. But that's the thing, right? I've been watching the other kids – like some creepy stalker – for years! I don't know all their names but I know some! I know which ones play baseball and which ones are in the band and which ones hang out by the bike racks and try out curse words and-and-and I shouldn't know all that stuff! The new kid isn't supposed to already have the building layout memorized because he kinda-sorta-maybe broke in a couple times to run around and check out the*

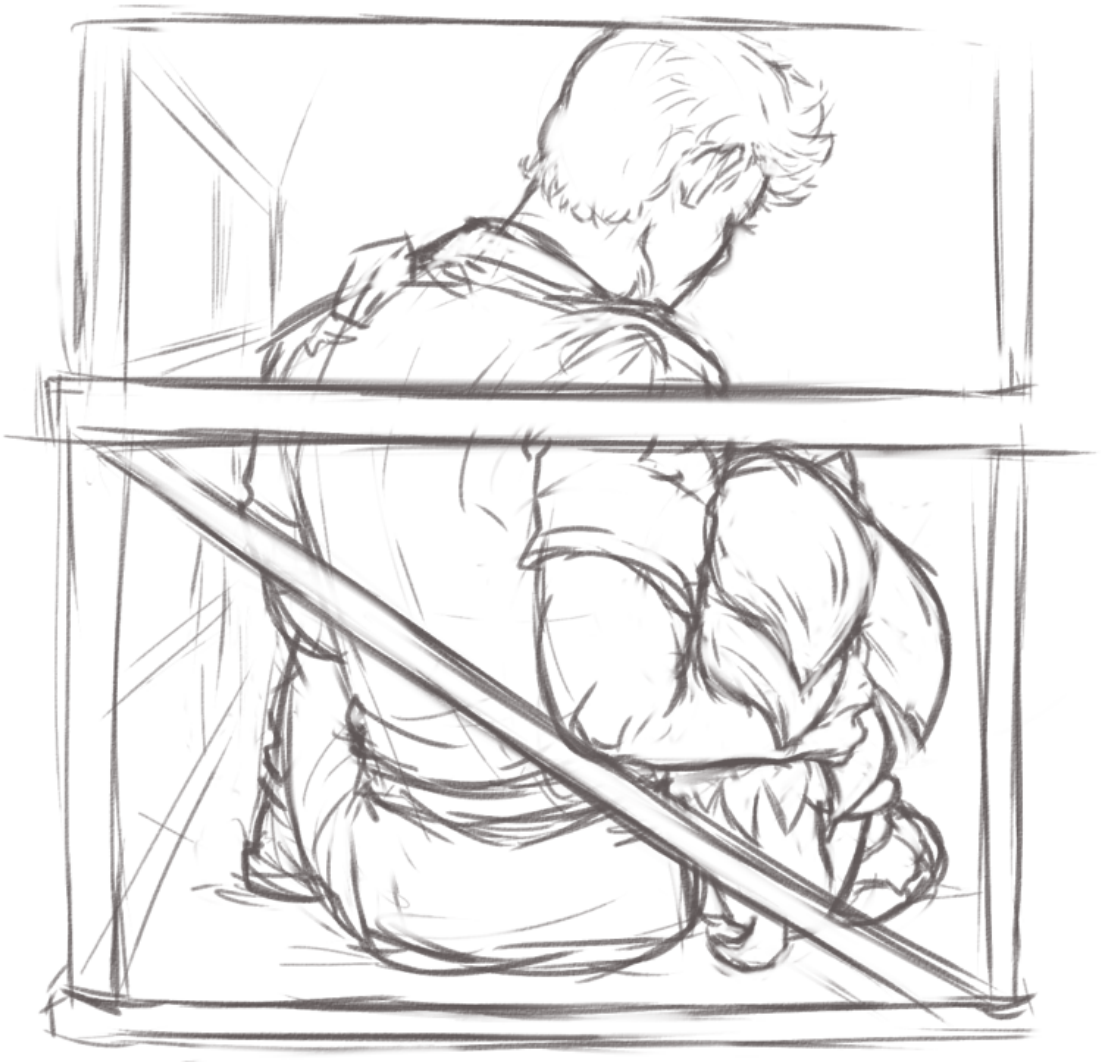
*science fair projects. If I go in there and start talking, they're **all** going to know and, like, think I'm a freak, right? As if being a blue anthropomorphic alien animal wasn't bad enough! But a blue anthropomorphic alien animal AND a STALKER?? No. Nope. Bad idea. You guys can just home-school me. You've got time for that, right?"*

*Tom could only blink for a moment before exhaling heavily. "Ok, a lot to unpack there. Putting aside the breaking-and-entering for now..." Sonic laughed nervously. "While your particular circumstances are very uniquely **you** ...you're not the first kid to worry about fitting in."*

" W-well, I mean, yeah, but–"

" Now, will it be awkward sometimes? Probably. But it's awkward with us sometimes, and that's not so bad, right?"

He watched Sonic fight a smile, and then the teen crawled over to sit next to him. "It's kinda bad."



Tom raised an arm up, checked quickly for any hint of a spark coming from the blue quills, and then cautiously brought the arm down around the boy's shoulders. Sonic stiffened, briefly, and then relaxed, leaning against the human's side without a word. Tom took a moment to collect himself, quiet his pounding heart, log this away to gush about to Maddie at bedtime. When he spoke again,

*he was proud of how casual he was able to keep his tone. " You've been watching from the sidelines for a **long** time, kid. I think it's high time you 'got in the game', so to speak. Don't you?"*

Sonic sighed. "I guess. But it's gonna be hard..."

"The good things sometimes are." Tom gazed down at the boy who'd turned his life upside-down in the best possible way. "But that just makes it more worth the effort."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

So far they'd both been right. It had been hard, a serious adjustment in a short amount of time that had already seen its share of serious adjustments. But it had also been good, as evidenced by the way they could already look back on that moment with a bit of perspective, a sense of humor. Tom reached out a hand and ruffled the fur atop the boy's head, got a jolt of serotonin when he didn't pull away. "Just keepin' ya humble, kid," he said. As he retracted his hand, he gave one ear a quick rub.

Sonic's muzzle flushed pink and he darted away, returning a millisecond later more composed, backpack slung over one shoulder. “Hard to be humble when you're this awesome. Now for real, let's go before I decide to run to school instead of giving you the honor of chauffeuring me.”

“Oh, forgive me, your Awesomeness. What would I do without you kicking the back of my seat for ten blocks?”

“Go back to talking to donuts?”

“Fair.”

* * *

Not kicking the seat out of habit was hard enough. Not kicking on purpose because Tom had made a point of mentioning it? Damn near impossible. It wasn't really Sonic's fault. His feet dangled off the booster seat and it got uncomfortable really fast. Whoever had invented these dignity-destroying devices had apparently never been a kid, or they would've thought to include a footrest or something.

He tried to sit criss-cross-applesauce, but his knees hit the armrests, knocking the days-old empty juice box out of the cup holder.It fell to the car floor, joining the menagerie of miscellany that had collected there in the scant month he'd spent occupying this space. Chin in one hand, he glanced around the backseat.

He hadn't meant to make such a mess. In all honesty, he couldn't even remember having made it. It had just sort of...happened. Car rides were boring, so if they were going somewhere further than school or the grocery store, he usually brought something along to keep busy. And then those things just...tended to stay in the car. So the rest of the bench seat beside him was littered with comic books and magazines, a handheld electronic game that they'd found at a neighbor's yard sale. The floor...well, Maddie had called it a 'health hazard', but snack trash had to go somewhere, right? Each time he looked at it all, he wanted to clean it up, but by the time they got wherever they were going he'd forgotten. So it just...collected.

It was weird. Like a mini-version of his room. But at least his room had a door he could close. He didn't leave stuff around the house if he could help it. He knew he could be careless, but he made a conscious effort to be a good house guest. *"It's your house too."* They'd said that more than once, but that wasn't right. It was their house; he was just living in it. Just like this was Tom's ~~loser cruiser~~ van and he was just a passenger.

A messy passenger.

Whose legs were starting to cramp.

He let out a huff, leaned in towards the center of the van. "I still hate this, by the way."

"Noted."

He frowned. Sometimes the man was too unflappable for his own good. "How long do I have to use this thing anyway?"

"By law, until you're four-foot-nine."

Sonic straightened up in his seat so forcefully that the seatbelt locked shut on him. "What?!"

"I don't write the rules, buddy."

"But-but-but but I don't know if I'll *ever*–"

"Take it easy, kid." Through the rear-view mirror they made eye-contact briefly. "I'll make you a deal. If you're not that tall by the time you're eighteen, we'll come up with a different solution."

"Sixteen."

"Seventeen."

Sonic inhaled sharply, chest straining against the still-taut seatbelt. He let the air out through his nose and muttered, “Fine.” He slumped back, folding his arms and pressing the soles of his sneakers up against the back of the driver's seat. “God, you guys suck.”

The car slowed to a stop at a red light, and to his dismay, the human twisted around, raising his sunglasses to fix the hedgehog with a hard stare. “You *do* know it hurts when you say that stuff, right?”

Sonic's face flared so hot so fast he thought the tips of his ears might've been smoking. His first instinct was to bolt, and the seatbelt suddenly felt like a straight jacket. *'Crap. Crap crap crap crap crap crap crap.'*

Was this it?

The end?

How many times could he shoot his mouth off before they decided they'd had enough?

How many times had it been?

He couldn't remember and that was probably a bad sign.

The blood was pulsing in his ears and he couldn't tear his eyes away.

The light turned green and the car behind them tapped on the horn and Tom turned back to the road. A dawning feeling of pain in his biceps made Sonic glance down. His claws had come out. They hadn't broken through his gloves (they never did), but they were jabbing him through the fabric and he had to make a conscious effort to retract them. The blood that had rushed to his face, however, didn't seem to want to go anywhere. His stomach was clenching uncomfortably. How could a simple sentence send him so quickly into 'fight or flight' mode? A tiny bubble of petulant anger (at who he didn't know) got his mouth moving again. “Way to put a guy on the spot...”

“If you don't want people calling you out when you're being a jerk, then you probably picked the wrong family.”

Sonic stared at the back of the driver's seat headrest, chewing his bottom lip. Tom didn't sound mad anymore. He actually hadn't really sounded mad at all in the first place. Sonic couldn't quite place tone – but it was one that usually showed up when the human went into 'explainer of the world' mode. Sonic had heard it enough times to recognize that much, but what it meant...that was still a mystery. But not mad at least. And he was using that big, heavy word again. Weird. But good weird, if the unclenching of his stomach was any indication. “That's...that's something families do...?” he asked quietly.

“The good ones, anyway. If they didn't, then what's the point, right? Just a bunch of people in a house being jerks.”

The teen let out a short sigh. “Yeah, that sounds pretty awful.” His feet dropped down, heels tapping against the upholstery. “What happens next?”

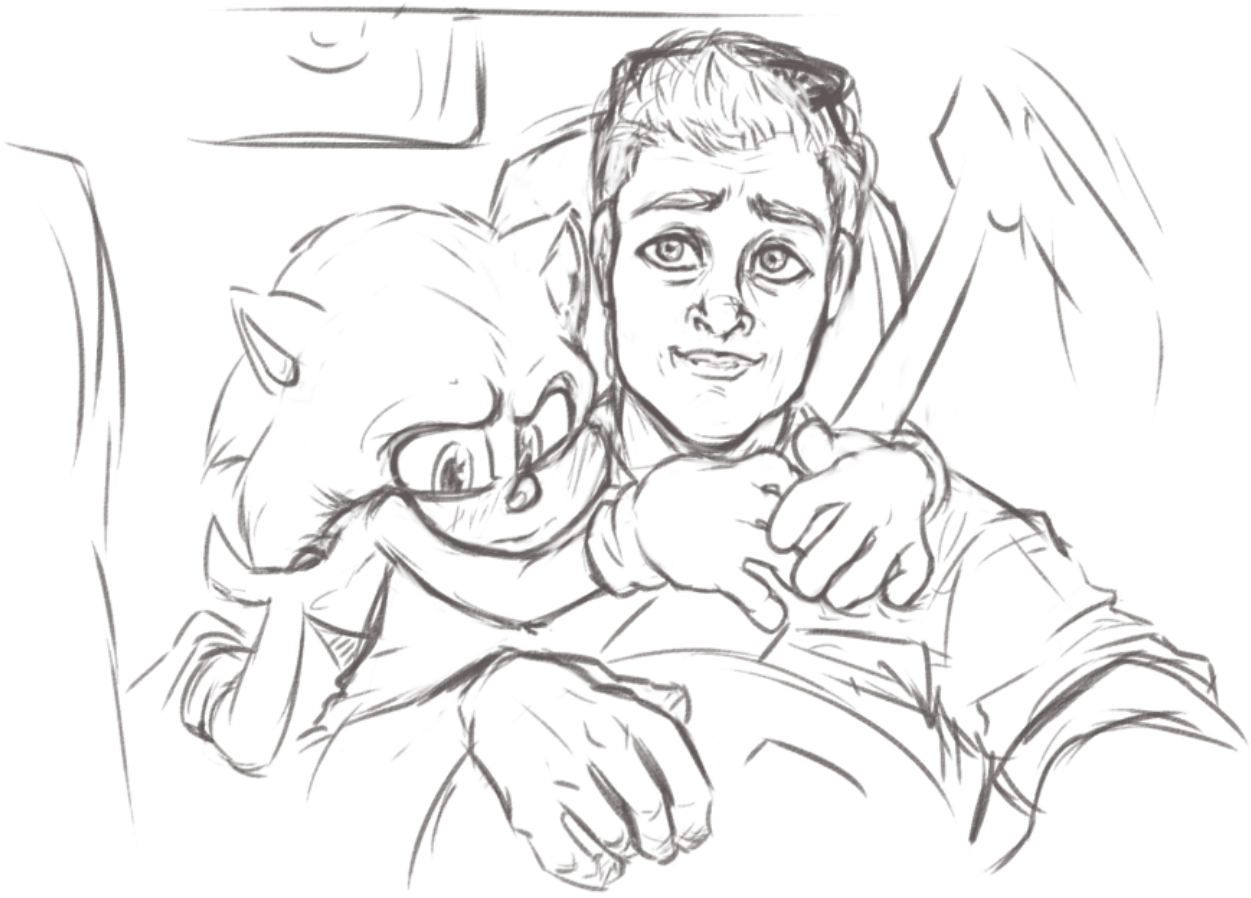
“Hmm?”
“What does the jerk do? After getting called out?”

“Apologies are always nice, if they're sincere.” Tom slowed as he joined the drop-off line in front of the school. “Cause usually the jerk didn't *mean* to be a jerk. He was just frustrated and not really thinking about what they were saying. Right?”

“Uh...r-right, yeah.” Sonic gripped his knees. Through the windshield, the school loomed large. He didn't have much time. “I, um, I didn't mean to – you guys don't really su – no, that's terrible, of course they don't suck, you don't have to tell him that.” He glared at his shoes. Talking to himself was something he was trying to quash, but when he got worked up it was that much harder. “Shut up! I'm trying to – I *know!* Just get on with it before–”

The car came to a stop.

'Crap.' Sonic unbuckled his seatbelt and hurled himself towards the driver's seat, wrapping his arms around both the headrest and Tom's neck.
“I'msorryIwasajerkit'skindamydefaultsettingsometimesIdon'tknowwhatI'mdoingthankssomuchforletting melivewithyouguysyou'reseriouslythebest,” came out all in one breath. Chest pounding, face burning, he dropped down to the floor and grabbed his backpack. With two hands he yanked the door open and hopped out onto the sidewalk.



“Hey.”

He cringed. Maybe that wasn't right. Would he get a do-over? Slowly, he twisted back towards the van, surprised and relieved to see Tom smiling as he leaned one arm out the window. “Y-yeah?”

“That was a pretty good one. You're not as bad at this as you think.”

Sonic shifted his backpack straps, trying not to think about any of the other kids filing past him on the pavement. “Whatever.”

The human chuckled, a teasing glint in his eyes. “Have fun at school today. Try not to cry too much.”

“Pft,” the teen scoffed, smirking. “Yeah, alright Daaaaaaaa*aaaaaaaaaaaaa****aaaaaaaaaaaaa***onut Lord.” The smile dropped, pure terror in its place as a silence stretched out infinitely between the sidewalk and the van. And then time caught up with him again and he was speaking without breathing. “ItotallysaidDonutLordandanyotherwordyourheardwas100%**notwhatIjustsaid**.” He spun away from the vehicle, mentally kicking himself as he felt the blood rush back to his face and his claws push uselessly against his backpack straps. Without permission, his mouth kept running, making everything worse. “So just – whatever word you're thinking I just said that *isn't* Donut Lord, well, then, you're soooo wrong! Cause I would *never* accidentally say anything other than–”

“Ok, son...”

Tom's voice stopped him and he blinked. What? He had too much blood in his ears, he couldn't possibly have heard– Cautiously, sweat matting the fur to his temple, he turned back around. “Did...” His voice caught in his throat and he had to clear it. “Did you just say...”

“...ic.”

The sheriff was smiling, facing forward but watching him out of the corner of his eye. He shrugged. “I said 'Sonic'.” He put the van back into 'drive' and offered a salute as he started to pull away from the curb. “See ya for dinner.”

The hedgehog was left standing on the sidewalk, blinking, watching the van roll out of the parking lot. School hadn't even started yet and it seemed like he'd *felt* enough for three days. Chest aching, stomach churning, a tiny, tiny smile tugged at his cheeks. “...Jerklord.”

Chapter End Notes

First of all, I want to say THANK YOU SO MUCH to everyone who's reading and leaving kudos and comments, you all are making my days SO much brighter!

Second of all, if the end of this chapter seems familiar, that's because it's based off of this
I reached out and asked if I could adapt it because it's amazing and it fit so well with what I've been doing with this fic and I'm so thrilled and honored she said 'yes'! So, @enigmaticallyartful I hope this does your wonderful art justice!

Third of all, speaking of AMAZING artists, check this out!
I still can't believe this exists, you guys. It's stunning. I'm stunned. My heart is SO full.

So yeah, that's it for now! Two more chapters to go. I hope I can keep up this pace!

3/23/20 - Now with @thebigpalooka's AMAZING immustrations!

3/25/20 - Now with proper thanks to Humanities_Handbag for helping make this chapter the best that it could be!

The Fifth Time

Chapter Summary

In which Sonic stumbles across Tom's guitar.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Fifth Time

He'd forgotten about Tom's guitar.

Years ago, from afar, Sonic had watched him sit on the back deck, strumming and singing while Maddie handed out appetizers to their friends. He'd seen humans make music on TV plenty, but something about hearing it live just felt so much more...special. At eight years old, he was still pretty dodgey about getting too close to the humans. But that night he'd sat just at the edge of the woods, enthralled, until the party was over and the humans who were quickly becoming his favorites went to bed.

It had become a favorite Friday night activity for a year or two, until the number of friends showing up started to dwindle and then parties on the deck were replaced with game nights, which were then replaced (when the remaining friends stopped coming altogether) with movie nights alone.

And in the excitement of All-Things-Keanu, he'd forgotten about the guitar.

Until 3:35 PM on a Tuesday.

It was raining, the kind of cold, miserable rain only November could pull off, and the plans they'd made to go watch the high school football team practice were ruined. Maddie had suggested yoga, and homework, both of which he'd vetoed, but as she put the kettle on to make cocoa, she got another idea.

“I'm pretty sure Tom has an old NES in his closet in our bedroom. How 'bout that?”

“An-Ee-What?” He quirked an eye-ridge.

“You know, Nintendo – video games?”

“Oh! Oh, wow, really??” Socked feet already itching to take off, he jogged in place beside her.

“Yeah, I distinctly recall him forbidding me from selling it at the last rummage sale,” she said, tapping her chin. “It should be in the back of the closet in an old shoe box. Why don't you go take a look?”

“That's ok? I mean, I'm allowed to –”

One hand reached out and rubbed his ears, stopping him mid-sentence. “Yes, I'm telling you it's ok to go dig around in the closet. Better that than trust you to man the stove.”

He smirked. “Good call.” He was gone before she could blink.

He hesitated in the doorway to the master bedroom. Even with permission, it still felt strange. The room was dark, but on sunny days light poured in from French doors that led out to the deck (hide-and-seek was a lot of fun when you put that deck into play – you could start in one direction and then work your way around to an entirely different part of the house from the outside). He hopped up and hit the light switch, and the ceiling fan fixture blinked on.

The bed was big – much bigger than his – and neatly made – again, the opposite of his. It was easy to tell whose side was whose by the nightstands. They were identical, with matching table lamps, but one was home to a smörgåsbord of lotion bottles and magazines while the other sported a ringed coffee cup stain and a Tom Clancy novel. And given that there was a single-door closet on either side of the bed as well, deducing which was the one that held the sought after vintage video game system was a snap.

Yet still he hesitated, rocking back and forth on his heels. This was their room – *theirs.* The other rooms in the house were for everyone but this...this was for them. And Ozzie, the adorable jerk. He'd stood in this spot before – maybe a dozen times. In the middle of the night, when a particularly vivid dream had woken him up. At the crack of dawn when he'd been itching to take a run but couldn't leave without telling them first. But he'd never gone in. Each time his knuckles neared the painted wood he froze up, retreated. What if they didn't want to be woken up? They both had important jobs, people and animals that depended on them. They needed their sleep. He was a big kid – a teenager – practically grown. He could handle bad dreams. He could wait until their alarm went off to go for a run.

He could go into this room.

“Just...go get the video games,” he told himself. “Go in Donut Lord's closet, where he keeps all of his...his Donut Lord stuff and get it. Easy. Totally.”

One foot rose up and then his whole body pivoted and he began pacing in the hall. “She said you were allowed, this isn't a big deal. Yes it is! It's *their* room full of *their* stuff and what if you break something? C'mon, when have you ever broken anything? Last Thursday. But it was ok! Remember? No big deal, they said. Maybe they were just saying that cuz you started to get all sparky on 'em and they didn't want anything to catch fire. No – no. Accidents happen, they said. They break stuff. Ozzie breaks stuff. We all just, just try to be careful and clean up the mess afterwards. It's ok. You can do this.”

He forced himself to stop pacing and face the room again.

Took a big yoga breath.

Let it out slowly.

Stepped into the room.

The world did not end.

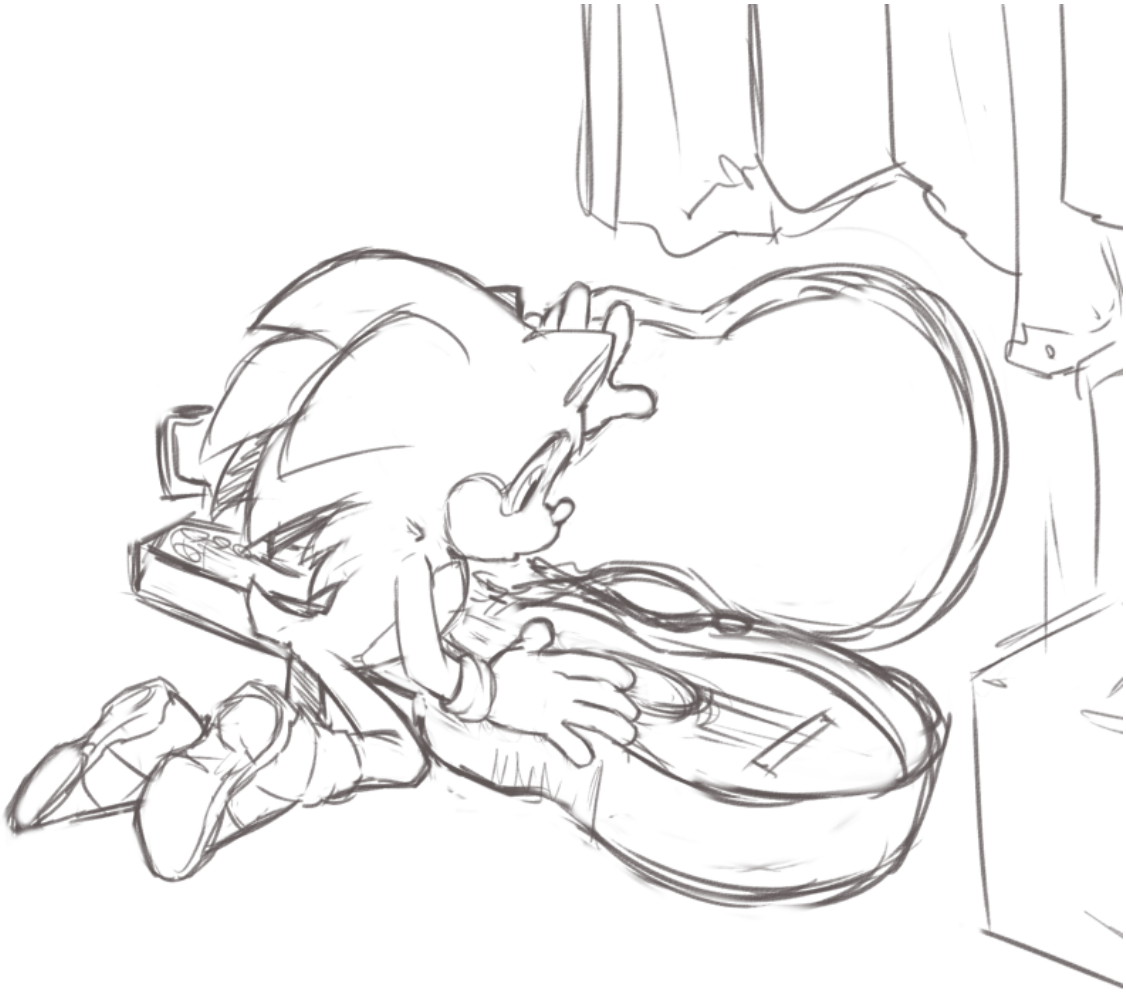
“Right. Ok.”

The closet that corresponded with the coffee-stained nightstand was more-or-less what he'd imagined it would be. Sheriff's uniforms all pressed and on hangers next to plaid flannel shirts in every possible color. The shelf above the hanger bar had a motorcycle helmet that he logged in the back of his brain to ask about later, and a pile of what-looked-like photo albums. The floor was a cluttered mess of shoes, plastic bags filled with miscellany (old USB cables?) and boxes. “Shoe box, shoe box...which one is it?” On hands and knees, he poked around.

The smell of cut grass and shoe leather and sugar wrinkled his nose. “What in the world...?” he mumbled, before it clicked. Donut Lord. The closet smelled like him. Because of course it did. Duh. He let out a tiny huff, shaking his head even as a warm feeling settled in his stomach. It went back deeper than he'd expected and he was almost completely inside before his search led him to a box with 'N-E-S Maddie, Don't Touch!' scrawled across the side in sharpie.

“Ha-HA! Yes!” With one hand he yanked it forward...and something big and black that had apparently been held in place only by this particular box lurched towards him as well. “Nonononononono!” Reflexes working exactly as they should, he shot both hands up and caught the...whatever it was. It was heavy, and oddly shaped and out of curiosity he tapped his knuckles against it. It sounded half-hollow. Was that a thing? “Hiding a baby vampire in here, Donut Lord?”

Carefully, he eased the object down to the floor, scooted back with it towards the light so he could get a better look. It was a container – it had hinges and latches and no lock. On curious-teen-autopilot, he opened it.



The moment the light hit the polished wood, he froze.

“Oh.”

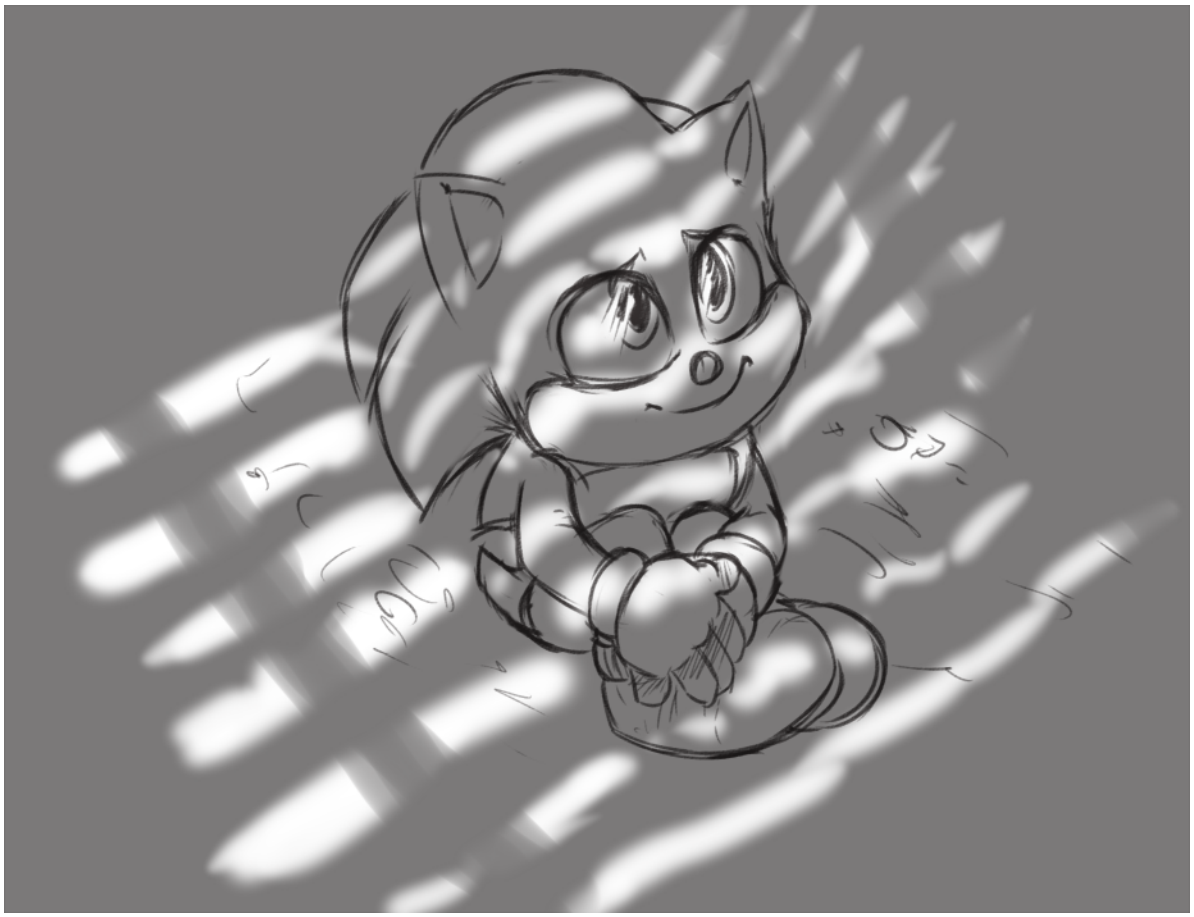
All at once he was eight-years-old again, watching from the tree line, creeping under the deck to hear better. He could hear it now, so clear he wondered how he could've forgotten.

“No, you don't tug on Superman's cape,

You don't spit into the wind,

You don't pull the mask off that ol' Lone Ranger

And you don't mess around with Jim.”



The case was dusty. Had to have been tucked away in that closet for, what, three, four years? Stomach clenching, he wondered why. Even from his hidden vantage point, playing this instrument had always seemed to be such a joyful thing. The smiles, the laughter, it was all as vivid in his mind as if it had been days ago instead of years. So what had happened?

He let a hand rest on top of the strings.

“Hey, everything ok in he– oh! Wow!”

At the sound of Maddie's voice he scrambled to his feet, ears flat against his head. “I'm sorry! I'm sorry! It kinda almost fell on me but I shouldn't've opened it and–”

But she just kept coming towards him, dropping to her knees on the floor beside the bed. “Are you ok?”

“Huh?”

“When it fell.” Her hands were on him, tilting his head up, to one side then the other. “Did it hit you?”

“What? Oh, n-no, no, I'm ok.” He pulled out of her grasp, muzzle hot.

She sat back on her heels. “Good.” Her eyes stayed on him a moment longer and he turned his own gaze away, back to the guitar. She must've followed suit, because she ran a hand lovingly over the guitar. “I forgot he had this in the closet.”

“You forgot too...?” Sonic hung back, watching.

“Hmm? I mean, I didn't forget he *had* it, I just hadn't thought about it in a while.” She snatched the tissue box off of the nightstand and began wiping the dust off the case. “Wait – you knew about this?”

“Oh, uh, yeah.” He nodded, feeling comfortable enough to sit back down beside her. “When I was little I use to come listen to him play.” Her expression changed to one he was starting to recognize and dislike – pity. It was why he avoided talking about his life in the woods as much as possible. That 'poor Sonic' face the both of them made whenever he let something slip was unbearable. Eager to move beyond it, he asked, “So how come he doesn't anymore?”

“Hmm?”

“Doesn't play?”

“Oh, I don't know...lack of an audience, I guess? When we first started dating he played for me *all* the time. Cheesy? Heck yes, but I loved it. Before all our friends started having babies and getting too busy, he used to hold court out on the deck and play for hours. He played at our wedding, at Jojo's baptism, at my graduation party. Any opportunity he had to make me cry, he went for it.”

The hedgehog shifted in his seat, crossing his legs and gripping his ankles. “He made you cry? He never sounded off-pitch to me.”

Laughter bubbled up as Maddie shook her head. “Happy tears, Sonic.”

“I don't follow.”

“People cry for all kinds of reasons,” she told him, in that matter-of-fact, here's-how-the-world-works way of hers. “When they're sad, of course, but also when they're angry, or hurt. Or, in my case, when they're filled to the brim with happiness because their cheeseball husband decided to sing Jim Croce as his wedding toast.”

He liked talking about crying just about as much as he liked actually doing it, so he asked, “Jim Who?”

“Oh, don't let Tom hear you say you don't know who Jim Croce is.” She wagged a finger at him and then closed the guitar case. “Now – if you actually want me to get that game system up and running before dinner, we'd better get started.”

“Right! Yes!” He hopped to his feet. “Let's do it.”

Maddie tucked the guitar case back into the closet and the afternoon passed uneventfully. It was easy to get distracted when you had to guide a tiny plumber through a terrible mushroom world full of weirdly hostile turtles.

But then at dinner...

Tom asked what they'd done that day.

Maddie brought up the video game and that got Tom reminiscing about after school marathon sessions trying to rescue the princess from the turtle king. “Think I was just a little younger than you are,” he said, pointing at Sonic with a forkful of mashed potatoes.

The teen blinked, trying to picture it. Freaky. “And it still runs? Dang...”

“Yeah, they don't make 'em like that anymore.”

Sonic shrugged, poked at his own plate. “We found your guitar too.” Casual. Just a passing observation. Not at all something that was making his stomach twist in uncomfortable ways.

“Oh yeah?”

“Mmhmm.” He nodded, speared a piece of broccoli with his fork. “Maybe if Pretzel Lady's sister ever decides to talk to you again and come visit, maybe you could play it. Cuz it was for family stuff.”

The humans exchanged a glance across the table but he didn't notice. His eyes stayed on his plate until he declared himself full and asked to be excused (which was still strange, but neither here nor there).

“Sure kiddo.”

“We'll call you later for dessert.”

He was up to his room in less than a second, pulling the stairs closed behind him. He had homework to do and he almost made it to his desk before veering to the left and flopping into the beanbag chair instead. His fingers brushed against the paddle-ball on the floor and on autopilot he grabbed it up. “Idiot. Why'd you go and say that? If Donut Lord wanted to play the guitar again, he do it. You shouldn't be buggin' him about stuff like that.”

Paddle...Paddle...Paddle...went the ball.

The rain pelted the glass of the skylight, nothing but black beyond and he was grateful for the string lights in the rafters. “They do *so* much for you already.”

Paddle. Paddle. Paddle.

“Yeah, the carseat blows chunks, and yeah, having to tell them when you wanna go for a run is a drag, but so what?”

PaddlePaddlePaddle.

“You get home-cooked meals and movie-nights and regular baths and someone to talk to other than yourself and–”

PaddlePaddlePaddle.

“Exactly! You should be happy!”

PaddlePaddlePaddle.

“I *am!* So what more do you want?!”

PADDLEPADDLEPADDLE.

“*I don't know!*”

The string on the paddle-ball chose that moment to snap and the ball went ricocheting across the room, knocking several books down from a shelf, and bumping a poster askew before sailing towards Tom's head as it appeared at the top of the ladder. “Whoa!” The sheriff ducked.

“OhmygoshI'msosorry!” Stomach icy, ears flat, he bolted upright. So caught up in an argument with himself, he hadn't even heard the stairs open.

“Geez, kid. I knew something was off, but I wasn't expecting booby traps.” With a grin, Tom put one hand on the floor to pull himself up and into the room.

Jokes. Ok. He wasn't in trouble. How loud had he been? How much had Donut Lord overheard? Tamping down that thought for the moment, Sonic stood, brandishing the ball-less paddle. “Apparently tourist-trap gift-shop toys aren't built to last.”

“Well I, for one, am shocked.” Tom chuckled. “S'all good. I've got something more fun for us to play with.” He raised his other arm, the neck of the guitar clutched in his hand.

The paddle clattered to the floor. “I – you – you didn't have to –”

“I know I didn't.” Tom set the instrument down gently and then hoisted himself up so he was sitting on the attic floor. “But I wanted to. Maddie said you remember this?”

Fists clenched at his sides, the hedgehog nodded.

“What about it do you remember?”

Crap. He'd already gotten the pity-face from Maddie today, did he really have to get it from Tom too? “I dunno,” he lied, shuffling his feet.

Tom merely shrugged and got to his feet, guitar in hand as he crossed the room to go sit at the desk chair. Silently, he tweaked one of the tuning pegs, plucked a string, then twisted the peg again.

Sonic watched him, feeling that same pull he'd felt back at the edge of the woods. He moved slowly closer. “I remember you used to sit out on the deck, with this big group of people around, playing until the firepit went dark.”

“That was probably right after we bought the house.” Tom kept his eyes on his instrument, plucking and twisting, so if he was making any sort of face, Sonic couldn't see it. He wondered if that was on

purpose. “This place was *the* premiere nightlife hot spot back then.”

The teen felt a smirk tug at his cheeks. “I remember it looked like fun. People would request songs and you'd just...know them.”

“Any in particular you remember?”

“Something about Superman and the Lone Ranger?”

Tom rearranged his fingers on the guitar and started strumming a deep, halting beat that Sonic instantly recognized. “You mean this?”

Nodding, Sonic found a seat on his bed, a smile blooming across his face.

Tom hit a sour note, stopped, twisted another peg. “Hang on.” He gave the chord another strum. “Ok, there we go.” He got the rhythm going again, cleared his throat, and then, “Uptown's got it's hustlers...the bowery's got it's bums...Forty-Second Street got Big Jim Walker, he's a pool shootin' son of a gun...”

Sonic watched, fingers tapping on the side of the bed. Something warm settled in his stomach, a comfort he had always associated with the humans in this house. Even all those years ago, listening in from under the deck, he'd felt safer than he'd never felt in the woods, not even in the cave. All those lonely nights spent wishing they'd stay up late, that the fire would last just a little longer, so they wouldn't pack up and go inside. Each creak of the wooden board above his head flaring a mix of fear and longing, both terrified and desperately hoping they might find him. And now, here he was.

Altogether too soon, Tom strummed the final chord and put a hand to the strings to quiet them. “How was that?” he asked, looking up. “Not too rusty?”

“I think you went into the wrong business. Why aren't you famous by now?”

Tom laughed, leaning back in the chair. “Don't really like the spotlight.”

“Says the guy who knows *everybody* in town.”

“Let's put it this way. I did one – *one* – open mic night at Tony's fifteen years ago and there's folks who *still* call me 'The Singing Cop'. Lesson learned.”

“They're just jealous, cuz that was **so. Cool.**”

“Well, I'm glad you think so.” Tom folded his arms atop the guitar, fixed his gaze on the boy. “If I'd known I had another fan in the house, I might've thought to break this bad boy out earlier.”

Sonic's ears drooped slightly. “Yeah well...” He hunched his shoulders. “Is that why you didn't? Cuz you didn't think I'd like it?”

“Bud, we only know what you like when you tell us. So far on the list we've got...” He held up a hand and started counting them off. “Keanu Reeves. Chili Dogs. Sports. Pizza. Bath Bombs. Running. When Maddie rubs your ears.” Sonic's face flushed but Tom went right on listing. “Walking the dog. Moose Tracks ice cream. Taco Tuesday at school. High fives. Mellow Yellow. Super Mario Brothers. There's probably a few I'm forgetting, but all that's to say that we want you to be comfortable here. I *know* you've got a love-hate relationships with my puns, so, I don't know,

maybe I thought singing the oldies might be...oh, what are the kids saying now? Cringe? Am I using that right?"

"I-I think so. That you got it right. Not that *you're* cringe. Why's it matter what I think anyway?"

"Well, gee, I don't know, maybe because you're important to us? To this family? Sure, sometimes it feels like a badge of honor to swap 'how I embarrassed my kid this week' stories with the guys at work, but–"

"You talk about me at work?" Around him, the room fell out of focus.

"Of course." Tom was smiling. "It's kind of fun. I never got to join in before."

He blinked hard, turned his eyes down.

"Sonic?"

His hands fisted in the blanket, whole face hot, every muscle tensed. He felt a tingle at the tips of his quills and bit down hard on his bottom lip.

"Sonic..."

He shook his head, gaze laser-focused on his bedspread.

He heard the soft thunk of wood touching the floor and the squeaky wheel of his desk chair being rolled, and then the scent of cut grass and shoe leather and sugar was right under his nose. He raised his head, just slightly. Tom was down on one knee beside the bed, looking up at him with a sad smile. The tingle faded.

"Can I sit?" Tom asked.

A small nod, and the man was settling down next to him on the comforter. A big, warm hand came down on his shoulder and he took a shuddering breath. "Sorry..." he mumbled.

"When we first moved you in here, we never really laid anything out...about what we were thinking. I guess we've been dropping hints – some subtle, some not-so-much – and leaving it up to you to figure it out. We've been so worried about not pushing too hard that I think we just made everything more sticky. And I'm sorry about that." He shifted, leaning in a bit closer. "Little known secret that you can't tell the kids at school: grown-ups have *no* clue what we're doing most of the time."

"Welcome to the club. We should get t-shirts made," Sonic muttered, unable to even muster up a passable amount of snark in his voice, and the joke fell limp between them.

Tom cleared his throat, straightening up again. "So here's what I think - things are going to have to change around here."

His chest seized up and he had to squeeze his burning eyes shut. Change, in his experience, was rarely a good thing. Change meant being shoved halfway across the universe under a hail of arrows, alone. "Why? What's wrong with the way it is now? We're best friends and that's *fine* – I know I keep messing it up but–"

"We don't want to be your friends, Sonic."

His stomach clenched. His heart pounded. His legs twitched.

“We want to be your parents.”

All as once he was back in the dirt, under the deck, silently watching.

Fearing.

Wishing.

Hiding.

Hoping.

They were words he'd been waiting for – for *years*. He couldn't possibly have just heard them.

Tom's voice was soft and tinged with uncertainty. “Is that...something you want too?”

He opened his eyes, but couldn't turn to look at the man beside him. Just that tiny movement seemed too much to ask his body, that was still hovering on the edge, making the air around them thick with static. Numbly, he realized Tom's hand was still on his shoulder. “What...” he managed, voice raspy, barely audible. “What does that mean?”

“It means, to start with, that day-to-day, things will pretty much look the same.” Tom's tone eased back to casual, more assured, and his hand moved, sliding down Sonic's arm and pulling the boy closer. “You'll get up, we'll take you to school, pick you up. We'll eat meals together and have movie-nights. You'll keep having to tell us when you need to go for a run, and maybe get a smart watch so we can call if you've been gone too long. You keep your room, but don't ever feel like you have to hide up here. We want you with us, when you want to be. If you need a break, sure, take a break, we might need one too sometimes. But we'll always come back together again.”

Sonic nodded, gripped his knees. “So what's different?”

“Different? Hmm. Well, to start we'll try to have these kinds of talks more often. The big, uncomfortable ones. Which, yeah, might suck, but might be good too. And we'll all try to not walk on eggshells around each other. When we mess up, we own it, we work to make it right, we move on. And we'll probably mess up a lot. So we'll get lots of practice making it right.” Below them, the sound of Maddie starting the dishwasher floated up the stairs. “Also...we might tell you we love you sometimes.”

His claws were suddenly digging into his knees from inside his gloves. “...what?”

“We love you, bud. You have turned our universe *completely* upside down, but I wouldn't have it any other–” He was cut off as Sonic slammed into his chest, clutching at his Henley.

The floodgates had finally burst, but as Donut Lord's arms wrapped around him, he let the tears come as Maddie's words echoed in the back of his mind.

“People cry for all kinds of reasons.”

As he struggled to catch his breath, feeling the fabric against his face grow damp, he couldn't say that he was happy.

He *was*.

But that happiness was tangled up in ten years of grief and fear.

Swirled up in exhaustion and relief.

Peeking out from under doubt and denial.

And fighting like hell to make itself known.

The arms around him squeezed tighter and he shakily drew in air. “...w-why?”

The question, so small and unsure, hung in the air for a long moment, before Tom's voice, equally small, equally shaky, answered, “How could we not?”

Sonic opened his eyes, focused on the guitar (leaning against his desk like it belonged there) and clung tighter still. “B-but I...I'm so much *trouble*,” he said mournfully. “You guys had it so good before. I know. I *watched* you. You were like this, this well-oiled machine and I'm just...just this wrench in the gears.”

“Hey. Hey.” Tom brought his hands to the boy's shoulders and eased him back so they could look at each other.

Or, at least, they *could,* if Sonic didn't hang his head, eyes on the wet-spot on Tom's shirt.

“Sonic, look at me.”

The teen forced himself to do it, eyes red and watery.

“You belong here. With us. Six months ago I never could've imagined my life would look like this, and now we can't imagine life without you in it. All that time I spent wanting to get out of this town, to do something that matters...*this* is what matters, Sonic. More than anything else I'll ever do.”

Sonic opened his mouth, but all that came out was a pitiable whine and he collapsed against Donut Lord's chest again. Damn these sweet, beautiful, wonderful people. He might as well have been eight again. How he wished he could be eight again. Strong arms held him tight and for a moment he let himself pretend.

Pretend he'd been spotted all those years ago.

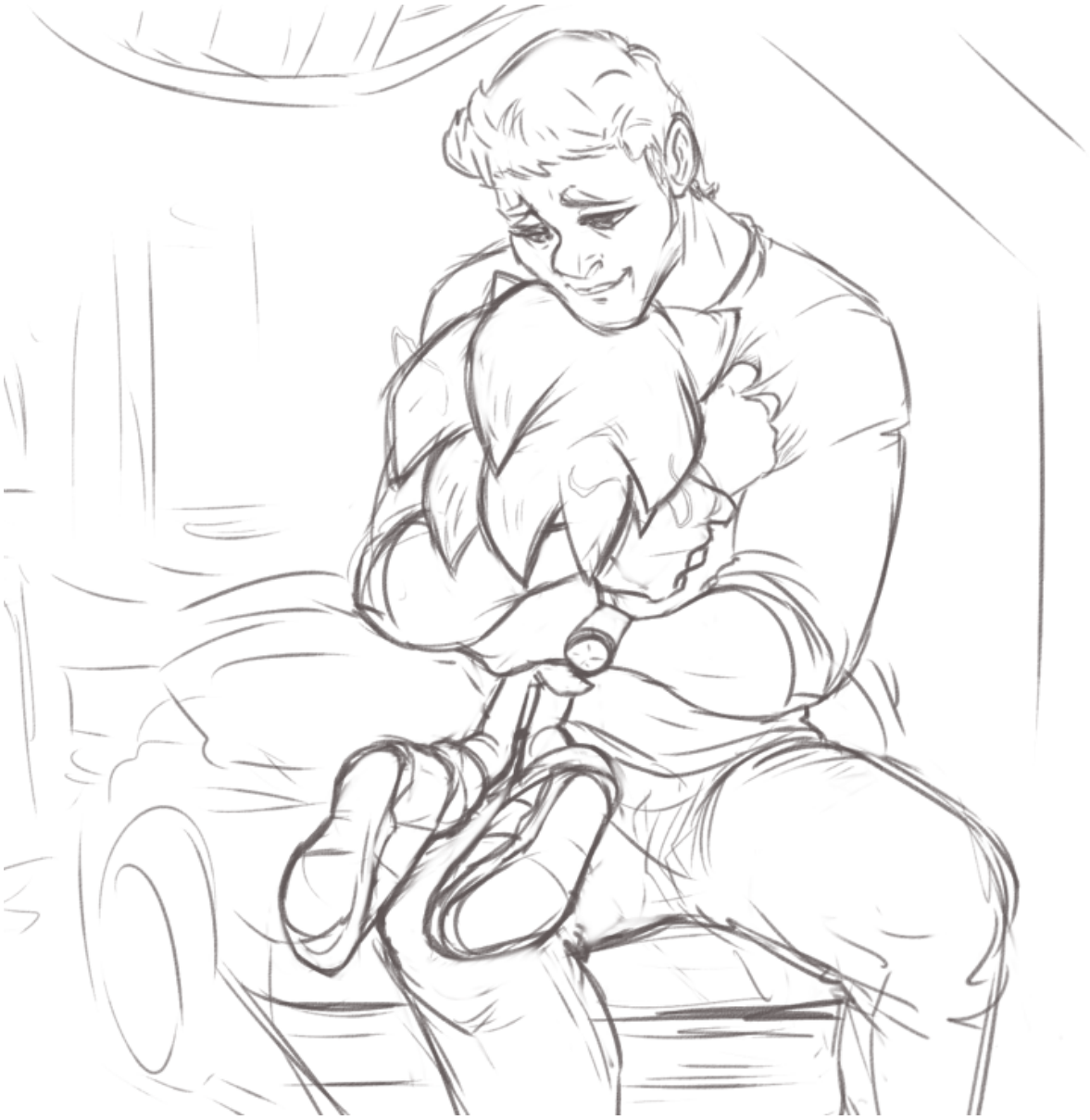
Pretend he hadn't wasted so much precious time hiding.

Pretend he wasn't such a sobbing mess.

“You're ok, bud. You're ok. Just breathe.”

So he did.

He just breathed.



It was past 9 when they eventually made their way back downstairs, seeking and finding Maddie on the living room couch under a throw blanket. She looked up from her phone at the sound of the floorboards creaking and smile. “Hey.”

Tom ran a hand over Sonic's head gently. “Why don't you help Maddie pick out something short to watch and I'll go grab us a bedtime snack, ok?”

The hedgehog nodded, and then silently shuffled over to the couch, climbing up as Maddie shifted to make room. She put her phone down on the coffee table. “So was it anything like you remembered?” she asked.

In answer, he curled in close, wrapping his arms around her as far as they would go.

She returned the embrace,and asked softly, “What happened, baby?”

He didn't look at her, kept his face tucked into her sweater. “You...Tom said...you guys wanna be my mom and dad...”

“Absolutely.” She dipped her face down to kiss him between the ears. “Yes.”

He drew in a shuddering breath, waited for the burning in his tired eyes to fade. “Ok.”

“Ok.”

“Can we watch Brooklyn Nine-Nine?”

“You got it.”

“Ok.”

* * *

“Man, this time of year sucks.”

“It's not all bad.”

From his spot on the living room floor, Sonic didn't bother to lift his chin off of the coffee table, where his homework was laid out. “No, it sucks. It's too cold, it gets dark *so* early, all my Halloween candy is gone...”

On the couch, magazine on her lap, golden retriever by her side, Maddie smirked. “Told you to ration it.”

“Yeah yeah.”

Beside her, her cell-phone buzzed and she glanced at it. “Oh, Tom's on his way home. Let's get Ozzie's walk in before he gets here.”

His ears perked up so forcefully they seemed to hoist his entire frame upwards because he was on his feet instantly. “Yeah, ok!” He dashed for the front door, Ozzie trotting close behind.

“Bundle up good, all right?” Maddie told him as she joined him in the foyer.

He paused with one shoe half-on. “How good?”

With a knowing look, she reached into the basket where they kept their hats and gloves and pulled out a pair of grey kid's sweatpants.

Sonic made a face. “Really?” Much like with the booster seat, they insisted on him wearing cold-weather clothes, no matter how much he assured them that he didn't need them. He'd come around a bit sooner than with the booster, though. Mainly because they'd taken him shopping and let him pick things he liked. It was harder to protest wearing his coat when it was bright red with reflective lightning bolt stripes on the sleeves.

“Really. It's cold, you said so yourself.”

He complied with only minimal griping (mostly for show), slipping the pants on and wiggling to get his tail through the little hole Maddie had cut out for him. Clothes in general were still weird, but he had to admit, these were cozy. He stepped into his sneakers and then beat her to grabbing his coat down from the hook on the wall (they'd installed one just his height below theirs). “Can I run while you walk?” he asked, zipping his coat up to his chin.

“Sure.” She finished buttoning her coat and then moved on to her scarf. “Just keep away from the roads. It's rush hour.”

He was jogging in place on the front porch as she hooked Ozzie's leash on. “Are we good? Are we good?”

She'd barely gotten out the 'Yes' before he was off. This was a routine he liked. He'd run a mile or two out, then back, check on their progress, and then dart off again. Over and over again, wearing now-familiar paths in the grass and underbrush all along the road, until they were drawing closer to the house. He met them at the end of the driveway, breath clouding in front of him and grinning widely. “Hey! Donut Lord beat us home!”

The minivan was in the driveway and as they walked past, something in the air caught his attention. Raising his nose up, he sniffed. Smoke. “Uh oh.”

“What?” Maddie asked.

“Stay here.” In a flash he was at the back of the house, at the source of the smell, and the rising tide of fear in his chest washed away, only to be replaced with bewilderment. “What the...?”

Tom was on the deck, stoking the fire pit. “Hey! There you are!”

“What are you doing?” Sonic jogged up the back steps, ears twitching.

Behind him, he heard Maddie's footsteps in the gravel path. “Hey...” She let Ozzie off the leash and climbed the stairs, crouching down to be at eye-level with him. “C'mere.”

“What?”

As he drew closer, she took his hand. “Did you come running back here because you smelled the fire?”

“Of course. I wanted to–”

“You can't do that.”

He quirked an eye-ridge. “Why?”

“Listen, I know you want to protect us, but it's not your job. We're the grown-ups. If you think something's wrong, you tell us, ok?”

Sonic scuffed the toe of his sneaker on the deck. “...ok.”

“Thank you.” She leaned in and rubbed her nose against his. “No more running into fire. Even if it *is* just a little marshmallow fire.”

“A what?” Attention back on the scene around him, he did a slow spin, taking everything in. There were pizza boxes on the table, and sodas, and a bag of marshmallows. And sitting in one of the Adirondack chairs flanking the fire pit...was Tom's guitar. “What is all this?” he asked, even as the answer to the question was staring him in the face.

“We thought...” Tom said, as Maddie came up beside him and he swung an arm around her shoulders. “...that it was time you got to be up here with us, instead of watching from out there.” He

waved a hand at the woods beyond the yard. “Whaddaya think?”

“You...you guys...” He looked around the space again, warmth flooding his chest. “But it's freezing out here.”

“The fire'll help with that,” Tom said.

“And, and it's just us. None of your friends...?”

“Next time,” Maddie said. She took a few steps closer and jammed her own beanie on top of his ears. “When the weather's warmer, we'll put the word out and see if some of our old friends are up for a reunion.”

“It'll be great. A lot of 'em have kids right around your age.” Tom opened the top box of pizza and started dishing out slices. “Memorial Day, Fourth of July, I bet we could really get this place hoppin' again.”

“You – I – really??” Sonic hardly even noticed the paper plate being placed in his hands, he was still beaming at them in disbelief.

Maddie steered him into a chair, put a can of Mellow Yellow in the cup-holder. “If that's something you'd like.”

“Are you kidding?? That sounds *amazing!*” He bounced, felt the weight of the food in his lap, and dug in, talking around the mouthful. “You fink we could get fireworks?”

“We'll see about that.” Tom laughed. “For now, let's eat.”

So they did. A whole pizza and a half, and then Tom settled in with the guitar and took requests, just like he used to, only he didn't know many of the current Top 40 hits Sonic kept requesting, so mostly he just played what he wanted to. He cajoled Maddie into singing a June and Johnny Cash duet but they didn't get through the first chorus before they were both laughing too hard to finish. Sonic hugged his knees and watched them, smiling to himself as a comfortable warmth settled in his chest.

Tom fell deep into the what Maddie declared to be the John-Denver-Ballad-Rabbit-Hole and as the fire slowly died, Sonic hugged his knees, eyelids growing heavy.

“...Talk of poems and prayers and promises, and things that we believe in. How sweet it is to love someone, how right it is to care.” Tom's voice washed over him, and he let his chin rest on his knees. “How long it's been since yesterday and what about tomorrow and what about our dreams and all the memories we share...”

By the time Tom had finished the song, the boy was asleep. Quietly, the adults put the food away and smothered the fire. Then Maddie took Tom's guitar so he could gingerly pick up the hedgehog, resting his furry head on a broad shoulder as they carried him up to bed. He didn't stir when they

laid him down, or removed his coat and shoes. He didn't stir when Tom pulled the comforter up over his shoulders, or when Maddie kissed his temple and whispered, “We love you.”

They were tiptoeing to the stairs when they heard him.

“Love you guys too.”

They turned back, but his eyes were closed.

After they ever-so-carefully closed the attic door, Maddie wrapped both arms around Tom's middle, squeezing hard. He kissed the top of her head. “So I was thinking...”

“About what?” she asked.

“About how we could make this whole thing official.”

She pressed her cheek into the hollow of his shoulder, smiling. “That's not gonna be easy.”

“No. But it'll be worth it.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took FOREVER and SO many edits and rewrites but I'm finally happy with it. A million hugs, as always, to the lovely @Humanities_Handbag for helping me make this chapter the best it could be!

For those of you who are curious, the two songs Tom plays are "You Don't Mess Around With Jim" by Jim Croce (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TajUFGstkk4) and "Poems and Prayers and Promises" by John Denver (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4d-NmoMHBbE).

I'm not sure how long the next chapter will take, but I'm hoping not quite this long. We'll see!

4/19/20 - Updated to include illustrations by the FANTASTIC https://thebigpalooka.tumblr.com/

The First Time He Didn't Hold Back - Part 1

Chapter Summary

In which a legal process is begun, parents keep a secret, and a boy starts to worry.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The First Time He Didn't Hold Back

Part 1

Judge Penelope Ramirez rarely had a full docket scheduled in her courtroom, even though her jurisdiction spanned three counties, and that was how she liked it. Rural Montana was such a far cry from the absolute chaos she'd left behind in Albuquerque five years ago. Whole weeks could go by without an assault case, or even a robbery. Instead, she generally spent her time settling land border disputes, quarrels between neighboring ranchers, officiating weddings and mediating divorces. It wasn't work that garnered headlines, and that suited her just fine.

Which was why she was surprised when her secretary buzzed to tell her that Green Hills' Sheriff wanted a moment of her time. She set the surveyor's map she'd been examining down and glanced at the speaker phone over tortoiseshell glasses. “Did he say what it's regarding, Julie?”

“No ma'am.”

She frowned. “Well, make an appointment, I suppose. I think we've got a slot open tomorrow before lunch.”

Over the speaker phone, a voice that was decidedly more masculine than Julie's piped up. “I was hoping you could squeeze me in now, Your Honor.”

She blinked. He'd driven two towns over on the hope that she'd see him? Whatever it was about had to be important. She began folding up the maps. “All right, Julie. Send him in.”

Sheriff Wachowski had his hat in his hands as he entered her chambers, eyes roaming the space. “Nice digs.”

“Oh yes, we were just featured in Seventies Paneling Monthly.” Ramirez slid the maps back into their designated manila folder and set it aside. “What can I do for you, Sheriff?”

He closed the door behind him and took a few steps closer, stopping just short of the pair of chairs reserved for visitors. He rocked on his heels, nervous tension radiating off of him. “Quite a big favor, I'm hoping.”

“I'm not granting your deputy's request for a permit to throw a block party out on Aqua Lake.”

That got the lawman to crack a smile, dimples showing as he shook his head. “Oh no, not that – though I do have to thank you for putting the kibosh on that idea. It's, um...” He paused, fiddled with the brim of his hat. “...it's something more personal.”

She tilted her head, considering him. They had an amicable working relationship, but she could count the times they'd spoken in person on one hand. And now he was asking for a personal favor? To say she was intrigued was an understatement. “Sit down, Sheriff.”

“Tom.” He pulled one of the chairs out, sat down stiffly. “You can call me Tom.”

A small nod and she folded her hands atop her desk. “All right, Tom. What's this big favor?”

He opened his mouth, then shut it again, repeated the action, shifted in his seat, drummed his fingers on the hat now resting in his lap. “You- This past summer, do you remember the black out?”

“Hard to forget a thing like that.”

“Right. And, um, the, uh, the tornado that touched down on Main Street a day or so later?”

“It was all over the news.”

“Yeah, of course, ok.” The drumming grew in volume and he blinked, seemingly noticing his own actions for the first time. Gingerly he set the hat down on her desk, folded his hands between his knees. “So back when all that… was happening, my wife and I… we found a boy.”

“A boy.”

“He found us, really.” The dimples returned, fleetingly, and then his expression darkened. “From the woods. We don't know how long he was out there, but it was...” He swallowed thickly. “… a while.”

Ramirez's glasses slipped down her nose and she pushed them back into place with one finger. “Naturally you reported this to the proper authorities.”

In his chair, this strapping, middle-aged man squirmed like a middle-schooler in the principal's office. “Technically I *am* the authority?” When she raised an eyebrow, he continued. “It's a... unique situation. He'd already been through so much, we just wanted to keep him safe.”

She straightened up in her chair, hackles rising. “And it never occurred to you that this child could have family somewhere, looking for him?”

“No.” When her stern glare didn't relent, he quickly continued. “He doesn't. Have other family, I mean.” He gestured vaguely, and she was about to speak again, when he apparently found the words he'd been searching for. “He's a refugee. Undocumented. The family he had… he won't go into detail, but we don't think they're alive.”

Her eyes widened. This far north it wasn't as common, but back in New Mexico she'd seen her fair share of undocumented children come through the courts. “And you don't want to get I.C.E. involved because…?”

“Because he belongs with us.” The sheriff was sitting up straight now, hands gripping his knees.

For a long moment they sat, spines stiff, shoulders squared, neither one blinking. At last, she unfolded her hands, laying them flat on the desk. “You realize what you're asking is… legally dubious at best, and criminal at worst.”

“In my experience, what's legal and what's right don't always sync up.” He leaned forward. “If I thought we could do this 100% by-the-book, we would. But it's just not possible.”

“And why is that, Tom?”

He looked away, at the art on the walls, at the floor, before reaching around to pull his cell-phone from his back pocket. “Because he's not… from around here.”

“Yes, we've established that.”

“No.” He was unlocking his phone, scrolling with his thumb. “No, I mean *really* not from around here.”

The phone was laid on the desk, facing her, and she pulled it delicately closer.

She squinted at the photo he'd pulled up.

Shook her head.

Adjusted her glasses and looked again.

On the screen was… something. Bright blue, covered in fur, with a short muzzle, big eyes and an even bigger smile, which it was aiming at the camera as it rested a baseball bat over one shoulder.

“What exactly am I looking at, Sheriff?”

“Our boy.” He sounded tired, but proud.

“You're serious? Because if this is intended to be a joke I'm failing to find the humor in–”

“That's our boy, Your Honor.” He stretched out an arm, swiped right with a finger.

In the next photo the creature was sitting at what appeared to be the counter of a diner – he was gaping at a sky-high stack of pancakes while a woman she recognized as the sheriff's wife beamed beside him.

In the photo after that, he was seated on the hood of a squad car, smirking behind aviator sunglasses while the sheriff's deputy stood next to him with a cardboard sign that read ‘TAKE YOUR HEDGEHOG TO WORK DAY’.

The next photo looked to have been taken at the Green Hills High School Homecoming Game. The sheriff's arm peeked into the foreground (as they often did with impromptu ‘selfies’) as he held the camera out to fit everyone in the frame. His wife was on his left, and between them, with a blue arm wrapped around both of their necks and a smile wider than his face, was the blue-furred creature.

On and on he scrolled, each picture too clear, too well-integrated to be the product of digital photo manipulation. And even if it were, to what end? She held out a hand to pause his scrolling and picked up the phone.

The lighting was dim in the picture, but the cameras were so good these days that the image was still crisp. Wachowski's face was out of frame, but the broad shoulder was unmistakable. And pressed up against that shoulder was a fuzzy blue cheek, as the creature slept. Carefully she zoomed in. The plaid shirt had a small, dark stain just under the creature's mouth. He apparently slept so soundly he'd been drooling.

And all at once, she didn't see a 'creature' any longer.

"You're serious," she said again, all the former sharpness gone from her tone, as she handed him back the phone..

"I know it's asking a lot." He slipped it back into his pocket. "But please...can you help us?"

She locked her gaze with his, and knew exactly what her answer would be.

"You told her?!"

"Mads, I had to." Tom kept his voice hushed. Sonic had already said his 'goodnights' and gone upstairs, but that didn't mean he couldn't wander back down for a drink and overhear. "She was ready to get on the phone with I.C.E. I had to make her understand why that was a mistake."

Maddie untied the sash of her bathrobe (a necessity for December in Montana) and slipped it off, tossing it on the 'clothes chair' in the corner before getting into bed next to her husband. "And that worked?"

"I think so." One arm tucked behind his head, Tom watched the ceiling, listening for any telltale creaks that would signal a certain someone was out of bed. "She said she'd be sending us a 'packet', whatever that means. I don't think it's code for 'going behind our backs to the Men in Black'."

"Still..." Maddie plucked the tube of hand cream from her nightstand, squeezed a generous dollop into her palm. "It made me nervous enough letting him go to school, taking him around town..."

"But look how great that's been going."

"I know, I know. But that's because it's Green Hills. The people in this town trust you, us, so they understand. Beyond that...she'd heard the 'tornado' story they ran with, right?"

"Yeah."

"Right, so, did you correct her?"

"It didn't seem relevant."

"So what exactly did you tell her?" Task completed, she shuffled down under the comforter.

"What I thought I had to. Nothing that wasn't true."

"And she believed you?"

"Yeah. Well, after I showed her the pics on my phone–"

“You what?” She pushed herself up on her elbows.

“Again – I had to. If she's going to help us do this, she's going to have to see him sooner or later. Better to freak her out now than later.”

“And how freaked out was she, exactly?”

“Less than I expected.”

Maddie lowered herself back onto her pillow. “Really?”

“Really.” Tom rolled over onto his side, facing her. “Maybe about the same amount of freaked out you were when you first saw him.”

“Huh.” His wife mirrored his motion, her face now inches from his. “Maybe I like her then.”

“It's a start, anyway.” The smile he gave her was tired, but warm. “We'll keep our eyes on the mail. Figure out where we go from here.”

“When do we tell him?”

“I was hoping to have a solid plan in place first. I don't want to get his hopes up if this all turns out to be impossible.”

“Right. Yeah. Ok.” She kissed him lightly on the mouth. “Love you.”

“Love you too.” He cupped her face in one hand, returned the kiss, and then rolled over to turn off the light. As he was laying back down, he felt her snake one arm around his torso, press her chest against his back.

“This isn't going to be impossible...right?”

He laid a hand atop hers, squeezed. “Not if we've got anything to say about it.”

For two weeks they watched the mail closely, but no ‘packet’ arrived. Via text during school hours they discussed whether or not it was worth asking again.

T: maybe she couldn’t figure out a way around the red tape

M: she could at least have sent a letter or called or something if that was the case

T: might not be good to leave a paper trail if that trails gonna land someone in jail

M: I guess

T: this was always a long shot, mads

M: I know I know

T: love u...pizza tonight?

M: yeah ok

So they pushed down their worries and worked to stay in the present. Seeing as how the present involved their Very First Christmas Together, it was easy to live in the moment – especially when those moments involved tree-chopping and cookie swapping and an introduction to Tom's parents. The former Sheriff Wachowski and his wife had been eased into the situation over months of phone conversations and texted photos, and while Tom assured Maddie that they were ready to meet Green Hills resident alien, she was still nervous as the holiday drew near.

When they showed up at the door on Christmas Morning with an SUV filled with presents for a hedgehog who quickly forgot any and all shyness he'd had, Maddie fought back tears. When they asked her if there might be babysitting opportunities in the future, she had to duck into the kitchen to wipe her eyes.

As they gathered in the foyer at the end of the day, Sonic zipping around fetching coats and scarves, Thomas Wachowski Sr. clapped his son on the shoulder. "So we'll see you in February?"

"Absolutely," Tom said. "Make an extra big batch of that Game Day Chili."

"Chili?" The blue blur paused at their feet and Sonic beamed up at them, a rough-hewn cowboy hat held in both hands.

The elder Wachowski's eyes crinkled around the edges as he smiled beneath his mustache. "Best chili in the tri-county area."

Beside him, his wife paused in buttoning her coat, the sequins from her sweater catching the light. "One of the only things this one cooks that *isn't* on a grill."

"Can I put it on a hotdog?"

"Son, you can put it on anything you like," the older man laughed, then he turned back to Tom. "You should come by early. We can show the boy the horses."

"You have *horses?* " Sonic squeaked.

That got another, more booming laugh out of the former sheriff. "It's more fun to ride 'em when there's not snow on the ground, but they never say no to visitors."

"I can *ride* them??" Sonic bounced on his heels, eyes darting between the two men.

"Don't see why not," Thomas Sr. said with a shrug and an easy smile.

The hedgehog was a blur again, high-pitched "OhmigoshOhmigoshOhmigosh!" emanating from the blue encircling them.

Maddie entered from the kitchen, a bag of neatly packed leftovers in one hand. "Told him about the horses, didn't you?"

The original Mrs. Wachowski took the bag as Maddie offered it up. "If you wanted to bring him by *before* the Super Bowl, you wouldn't hear any complaining from us."

"That sounds wonderful, Rosie," Maddie said, leaning in to hug the woman. "Sonic?" she said as they separated. "Slow down, baby, it's time to say goodbye."

The blur became a hedgehog again. “Huh? Oh! Right, right! Sorry.” With a guilty smile, he offered up the stetson still in his hands. “It was nice to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Wachowski.”

The man took the offered hat. “I don’t think we need to be quite so formal, son. We’re family after all.”

“Oh.” The smile faltered on the blue, furry face.

Above him, Tom and Maddie exchanged glances. Even six months in, even after Tom and Sonic’s talk in November, the boy was still calling them by their first names, or the nicknames he’d given them. If the older couple were expecting ‘granddad’ and ‘meemaw’, they might be disappointed.

Tom opened his mouth (to say *what* he didn’t know), but then his father was crouching down to be at Sonic’s level. “Tell you what, son. When Tom was a boy, all his friends called me ‘Big T’, and his mama ‘Miss Rosie’. How’d you feel about that?”

The boy’s smile returned, full force. “Yeah okay.”

Rosie bent down. “And how do you feel about hugs?”

He let out a delighted laugh. “They’re the best.” And when she opened her arms, he immediately hopped into them.

Maddie had to swipe at her eyes again while Tom wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

Her heart was so full that night, that after they tucked Sonic into bed, she texted Rachel. After six months of silence, the sisters reached a truce and she brought Jojo to visit over New Years. It only took one afternoon of Jojo and Sonic bonding over sledding and snowball fights for Rachel to warm up to the idea that maybe Tom had been right (though she didn’t exactly say as much out loud), and that the blue hedgehog wasn’t such a menace after all.

The Wachowskis rode that holiday high all through January, and as February settled in Ramirez and the ‘packet’ drifted further to the backs of their minds. Who had the time, anyway? There were PTA meetings to attend, science projects to construct, books about boy demigods to read at bedtime.

There were also teenage mood swings to deal with, and runs taken with the smartwatch conveniently ‘forgotten’ at home, and the occasional call from the principal when he got too excited or upset and something got broken. The attic stairs got slammed, and angry voices echoed on either side. But they always wound up together on the couch at the end of the day, even if Sonic sometimes chose to spend the time playing Pokemon on his secondhand Gameboy instead of watching sitcoms with them.

And on the flipside, there were Super Bowl parties, and boys climbing their front steps to ask if he could ‘hang out’ (‘play’ was apparently less cool, but sometimes it slipped out), and a school food drive that their hedgehog made sure his homeroom won.

They were getting their routine down to an art and sometime in March, Maddie made the observation that things felt quite a bit calmer, as compared to the fall. The emotional ups and downs of their first few months under one roof seemed to be smoothing out into gentle hills instead of sharp peaks and valleys. She could count the number of times Sonic had gotten upset enough to

spark on one hand. He was coming to them more and more for help when he needed it. Movie night was now so old-hat, so normal, that he no longer vibrated with excitement on a Friday night. Instead, he snuggled in between them on the couch with a look of contentment that never failed to melt her heart.

March thawed into April, April melted in May. The blooming beargrass ushered in Junior League tryouts and after that they didn't have time to think about anything other than juggling practice schedules with homework, and learning how to get grass stains out of jersey material and whose turn it was to host the post-win pizza party.

Which was why when the 'packet' (a yellow envelope so thick it barely fit in the mailbox) finally arrived on a Tuesday in late May, it got unceremoniously dumped on the kitchen counter as the three of them scrambled to get out the door to practice after school.

And on the counter it stayed, unnoticed until the weekend, when Maddie did her weekly 'sweep off all surfaces' routine. Arms full, it slipped out of her grasp, only to be caught by a blue blur who'd been on his way to the fridge for a Yoohoo. "What's this?"

Eyes on her task as she sorted out junk mail from bills, she answered, "Not sure, kiddo. Who's it addressed to?"

"Donut Lord. From some judge. Work stuff maybe?"

Her eyebrows shot skyward. It couldn't be. Six months after the fact?? She glanced down, read the name on the return address. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. "O-oh yeah, probably." She cleared her throat, covered like it was seasonal allergies and not the rising panic that was making her chest seize. When she spoke again, she was proud of how bored she sounded. "Case files or something. I'll take it."

He handed it over, completely oblivious to its life-changing contents, finished his quest for chocolate milk, and left her alone in the kitchen. Setting the rest of the mail back down, she undid the silver fastener and peeked inside.

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Quietly, hands shaking, she closed it up again. Then waiting until she heard the attic stairs creak closed, she took it to the bedroom as casually as she could manage.

"So this is it."

"Yup."

"There's...a lot more of it than I was expecting."

The Wachowskis were sitting on their bed with the rest of their lives laid out across their bedspread. Tom kept picking up individual sheets of paper and putting them back down.

The evening had been unbearably slow. Via text, Maddie had conveyed the pertinent information to Tom and then the two of them had done their absolute damnedest to pretend everything was normal. In Tom's opinion they both deserved Oscars, because the fourteen-year-old went to bed suspicious of nothing. Still, they'd locked the bedroom door just in case.

"Can't say they're not thorough," Maddie said, leaning forward on her criss-crossed legs.

Her husband pulled a card-stock-printed pamphlet into his lap. "No I cannot." He frowned. "Support groups for adoptive parents… can you imagine showing up for something like that?"

Her gaze fell on another pamphlet that read 'Parenting Children and Youth Who Have Experienced Abuse or Neglect' and her chest tightened. "Might not be a bad idea, actually..."

He leaned closer to read over her shoulder, letting out a low whistle. "Fair."

"We're not… I mean… he's not…" She picked up the leaflet, sat back against her pile of pillows. "He's doing ok, right? I mean, all things considered?"

Tom scooted back so he could drape an arm around her shoulders. "Absolutely. Look; 'build confidence' - who's cheering louder than every other parent at his games?"

"Yeah, but–"

"'Express support'. 'Be consistent'. 'Allow them to express their feelings'. I think we've been doing alright by him, even without a piece of paper telling us so." He kissed her temple. "Could we keep doing better? Absolutely. Always. That's what this is all for, right?"

"Right."

"Right. So..." He gazed back out at the square acre of papers in front of them. "Know anyone who can forge a birth certificate?"

As it turned out, Carl 'knew a guy'. The 'guy' might've been him, but he offered to get it taken care of for free (because 'our Blue Devil deserves to be counted as one of us') so they didn't ask questions.

It *was* a bit awkward explaining why he was leaving the house as Sonic and Tom were coming back from a run. Maddie fumbled through an improvised story about swapping recipes and quickly distracted the hedgehog with homework talk.

And she wasn't the only one playing the game of *distract the boy*.

Tom was doing his own form of ducking and weaving around the house. There were interviews and papers to drop off and collect. They were seeing a notary at least once a week and there were only so many times the sheriff could tell his Errand Partner 'not this time, bud'. Each time the pointed ears drooped a little lower and he was running out of treats to bring home to ease the guilt. Three weeks in, and Sonic stopped asking to tag along.

The initial process took weeks (which, considering how long it took to actually get started, felt like no time at all). With each document submitted for consideration, they held their breath until they could release it as a sigh of relief when they were approved for the next step, and then did it all over again.

All the while, their boy - the one they were jumping through hoops to make truly and officially theirs - was watching.

Watching as they put their phones away when he walked in the room (sometimes mid-conversation). Watching as they snapped their laptops shut when he climbed up on the couch. Watching as they whispered to each other in the driveway, down the hall, over the kitchen sink.

There was a particular moment where he got home from school to find Maddie on the phone with his newly appointed grandparents.

Sonic zipped forward to scramble onto a kitchen stool beside her. “Is that Miss Rosie! Can I say hi! I just saw the *coolest* thing at school about-”

Maddie ended the call with a speed that seemed more panicked than anything else. “They had to go,” she said, quickly. “Sorry, honey, maybe another time?”

Sonic’s ears pinned. “Right,” he said. “Right. Okay…” He slid off the stool and went to go start his homework.

That night, going down to get water, Sonic heard Tom and Maddie whispering in their bedroom.

“I don’t know…”

“... be fine.”

“... but the poor kid…”

He knew listening in was wrong. Still, he crept towards the closed door, pressing his ear against the wood.

“We can’t have him picking up on anything.” That was Tom. “He’ll be okay-”

“I don’t know…” Maddie. “He’s so sad, Tom. He doesn’t know what’s happening. Should we just-”

“We can’t. After everything-”

Sonic pressed his ear closer, and the door creaked under his fingers. He froze.

The people behind the door stopped talking.

There was a pause, filled with fumbling and hissing. And then;

“Sonic?” Tom again. “That you, bud?” There was the sound of footsteps.

Sonic swallowed, zipping away farther down the hall just as the bedroom door opened.

Tom stood there in the dark, face barely visible. Beyond him, Maddie was sitting up stiffly in bed.

"Just getting water," Sonic said, trying not to let his voice crack. He took a step back towards the stairs. "Do you, uh…" he swallowed, "do you need anything?"

"No." Tom shook his head. "Make sure to get to sleep soon. You've got school tomorrow."

"Right. Yeah. Okay…"

By the time he went back up the stairs, Tom and Maddie's door was closed and the room was silent.

He went back to bed, but didn't get much sleep, their words tumbling around in his head, bouncing against tight shut eyelids. By the time the sun came up he was tired, groggy, anxious and angry. He pushed away his plate of waffles. He couldn't make eye contact. His vocabulary dropped to nothing but grunts. The car ride to school was a suffocating experience, one he was more than happy to be done with, slamming the car door closed behind him.

Jeremy Patinkins was waiting on the steps, brows raised. "Whoa. Fight with your… ugh…" He looked over at the car. "Your Tom?"

"It's nothing," Sonic growled, stomping after the human boy. He had Remedial Math first and he wasn't looking forward to steaming over the Pythagorean theorem. "Just done with that jerk."

"Uh huh."

"Him and his jerk car."

"Yeah…?"

"And his jerk house. And his jerk dog." Sonic pushed the school door open a little too hard, making a group of kids jump. "And his jerk job. And his jerk wife. And *her* jerk job."

"Uh huh…" said Jeremy.

His friend beside him groaned and then vanished in a blue blur. One of the teachers standing outside the door rolled her eyes fondly. "No running, Sonic."

Sonic appeared again, his backpack and lunchbox gone, books in his hand. "Sorry, Ms. Albani…"

Jeremy caught up with him in front of their lockers. They were right next to each other (the result of careful lunchroom bribing), which was good most days until Sonic was in a mood, leaning against the metal doors with his arms crossed. Jeremy shoved his things into his own, taking out his social studies textbook. "Is… everything good?"

"It's fine," Sonic said, scuffing the floor. "Totally *fine*."

"Uh huh."

"Totally, completely fine. No problems here."

“Mmmhm.”

“I’m so fine with those *jerks* in their *jerk house* with their *jerk cars* and their *jerk jobs* and their *jerk phones* and their *jerk jerky jerk faces*.”

“Oh yeah,” said Jeremy. “That sounds fine.”

“Come on, boys,” said Ms. Albani from her classroom door. “Sonic, we’ve got a quiz, sweetheart.”

“I know,” he muttered back. “Be there in a sec.”

She nodded and let the door close.

He turned to Jeremy again. “Sorry, dude. Just… not looking forward to being picked up.”

“Got it.”

“And that *Jerk* is going to pick me up…”

“Which Jerk?”

“ *Maddie the Jerk*.”

“Ah.” Jeremy closed his locker. “What if you didn’t go home?”

Sonic looked at him.

“Come over today. We can finish the game we started last week.”

“Oh,” the hedgehog said.

The bell rang over their heads.

“Shit.” Jeremy gathered his stuff. “Up to you, dude. Whatever you want-”

“That sounds good. That sounds *great* . I’ll text them-”

“Let me know what they say!”

The boys separated, rushing to their own classes; one a boy with squeaking sneakers, the other a blue blur into a classroom (“what did I *just* say about running, Sonic” - “Sorry! Forgot!”).

He texted them during one of the transitions, glad for superspeed so the teachers wouldn’t notice.

At lunch, he finally got a text back.

M: Stop texting during school

M: Yes, you can go to Jeremy’s

Which left the supersonic hedgehog in better spirits the rest of the day until the final bell rang.

Maddie must have already sent word because Jeremy's mother didn't seem surprised when the hedgehog hopped into the back of her minivan.

"Hey there, sweetheart!"

"Hi, Mrs. Patinkins!"

"Really, sweetheart, you can just call me Cheryll."

"Yes, Mrs. Patinkins!"

Jeremy lived only a mile away from Sonic, just past the treeline. He was there at least once a week with Jeremy (a boy Sonic had met at baseball, the two becoming best friends by the end of Sonic's first week - mostly because Jeremy had been the first kid who didn't fawn over his superspeed and shared his rabid love of guacamole), playing video games and practicing baseball strategies in the backyard.

Today was a video game day, though, and the two dropped their backpacks and headed to the basement, Cheryll promising to find something for them to snack on.

While Jeremy got the game loaded up (they'd steadily made their way through 2 out of 4 of the *Uncharted* series) Sonic was giving the stairmaster in the corner a run for its money. "If you burn out the engine again, my mom's gonna be upset."

"Oh. Right." Sonic slowed down, fumbling. His legs still burned from his jog with Tom a few days before. They'd been practicing running slower; a difficult feat for the supersonic hedgehog.

He took another few strides, groaning and turning the stairmaster off. "Can I get the green controller?"

"Sure." Jeremy took the black one, setting the green one on the cushion beside him.

The game started up.

Jeremy scrolled through their saved games. "So," he said, finding the one left from last week. "What's your deal."

"I don't have a deal." Sonic crossed his legs, leaning against the back of the couch.

Their characters began to move. "People who walk into school like you did today have a deal."

"Do not."

"Do too."

"Do *not*."

"Do too!" Jeremy's character kicked Sonic's character.

Sonic's character kicked Jeremy's back harder.

They played for a few more minutes in silence, the air filled only with the sound of buttons clicking and characters on screen shouting and grunting.

"So," Jeremy said again. "What's really going on?"

Sonic pressed random keys on his controller, trying to disguise how his hands had started to shake. "Um," he said, eyes fixed on the screen. "I think…" He took a breath, "I think I'll be leaving soon?"

The game paused.

"Hey!" Sonic pointed. "I wasn't done-"

"You think *what?"*

"Nevermind. Sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"Like hell you shouldn't have!" Jeremy put his controller down, twisting around to sit cross legged on the couch, facing his friend. "What do you mean, you think you're going soon? Going *where* ? Like… your family is moving or something?"

"No!"

"Then *what*?"

"It's just…" Sonic rubbed the back of his neck. "My da- my Tom. Tom, I mean. Tom and Maddie. They're keeping a lot of secrets right now. Not letting me go out. Not letting me talk to anyone on the phone. The entire house has turned into one big secret that I'm not allowed to hear. And I think…" he swallowed again. "I think that the government might know I'm here."

Jeremy blinked. "You think-"

"It makes sense."

"No. It doesn't."

"It *does*." Sonic felt his eyes burn and swiped at them quickly. "And if that happens, then I have to go. I don't know how long, but I'll have to *go* and hide until they lay off again. And I don't know when that'll happen. And I just want you to know because you're my best friend, which I don't tell you enough! And you should know because if I go and I'm not at school or practice, then at least-"

"Sonic." Jeremy grabbed his arm. "Dude. Breathe."

Sonic somehow found a way to drag in a deep breath.

Jeremy waited for him to inhale and exhale a few times before settling closer to his friend, both of them crossed legged, knees touching. "Dude. The army isn't after you."

"You don't know that!"

"I *do* ."

“How!” Sonic gestured wildly with his hands. His quills sparked. “My- Tom and Maddie are keeping everything one big *secret* -”

“And that *royally sucks*, but I don’t think that secret is going to end up with you on the run.”

Sonic blinked. “You… don’t?”

Jeremy shook his head. “If that was true, you wouldn’t be allowed to come over here today.”

The sparks continued on Sonic’s quills. “Maybe because they’re letting me say *goodbye* or something.”

“And you wouldn’t be allowed to go to school.”

Which in hindsight made sense.

The sparks dimmed.

“Maybe… the principal knows or something. Maybe the school is protected.”

“Okay, so what if it is.” Jeremy shook his head. “You *definitely* wouldn’t be allowed to go to practice. Or to any of our games. Did they say anything about that?”

“... no?”

In fact, Tom and Maddie had seemed enthusiastic about the game next week. They’d gotten new face paint and everything. Tom had even made room on his overstuffed phone camera for all the pictures.

The sparks settled, keeping Cheryll’s couch unsigned.

“See?” Jeremy picked up his controller again. “You’re not going anywhere. Your parents are just being parents. Which means that occasionally they’ll keep secrets and act really stupid.”

“You think so?”

“Trust me,” said Jeremy. “My mom once tried to surprise me and my sister with a trip to Disney. Got us all pumped up thinking we were going to the Everglades. I was ready to see my first gator!”

“Oof,” said Sonic, who’d only seen Disney at night when he’d run through.

Jeremy shrugged. “It was fun, but, you know… Sometimes parents keep secrets from their kids, and it sucks, but it’s not the end of the world. It helps to not freak out thinking you might need to hide from the government. If that was true, we’d all be extra anxious all the time. On top of everything else we’ve got to be anxious about. And I’m already losing it over that Social Studies project.”

Sonic snorted. The sparks were gone from his quills, and he leaned back against the cushions. “So… you don’t think I’ll-”

“Nope.” Jeremy popped the ‘p’ at the end of the word. “I don’t think you’re going anywhere.”

His friend took in a deep breath and let it out. He picked up his own controller. “Okay,” he said.

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good.” Jeremy twisted around, back against the couch again. “Let’s start this level over. You were cheating.”

“Wasn’t.”

“You can’t *speed press the buttons*. That’s not allowed!”

“Maybe you need to get *faster*.”

“Maybe you need to *slow down*.”

“Maybe you need to-”

“Boys,” Cheryll warned from the top of the stairs, walking down with bowls of pretzels and apple slides. “Is that arguing I hear?”

“No, Mom.” - “No, Mrs. Patinkins.”

Tom was sitting on the front porch when he got home. “There’s my guy,” he said with a smile. “How was your playdate?”

Sonic wrinkled his nose, working to hide his own smile. “Only little kids call it that,” he reminded. It was an exchange they’d had dozens of times, and Tom always thought it was funny.

“Right, right, my bad,” Tom stood and cracked his back. “How was your super-cool-tough-guy-hangout?”

The hedgehog snickered. “Good.”

“Glad to hear it.” Tom trotted down the stairs. “And I’m glad you're here. Mom just called in pizza and I need to hit the hardware store on my way to pick it up. You wouldn’t want to, oh, I don’t know, tag along, would you?”

Sonic blinked. “Oh. Uh, yeah. Yeah, I guess I could do that.”

Maddie appeared at the front door. “Hey, blueberry! Perfect timing!”

He felt his muzzle flush. Her list of pet names was getting pretty long. “Hey Maddie.”

She was jogging down the stairs, one hand outstretched. “I can put your bookbag inside. You’re going into town with Dad?”

“Was gonna, yeah.” He slipped the bag from his shoulders and offered it over. The way they were referring to each other didn’t go unnoticed, and it had his brain buzzing. Maybe Jeremy was right. Maybe it was a dumb, non-life-threatening secret they were keeping. Maybe they were feeling guilty and being extra nice on purpose. It wasn’t as good as just *not* keeping secrets, but it went a long way to assuage his nerves.

“Excellent.” She crouched down in front of him. “Can you stop at Pansy’s too? I just got off the phone with Miss Rosie and a deer got into her garden and ate all her tomatoes! She asked if we could pick up new plants and bring them by her house tomorrow after school. Can I count on you to help me out with that?”

He nodded, finding it easier to match her smile. “No problem.”

She reached out and ran a hand through the fur on the top of his head, rubbing his ears. “Thanks, babycakes.”

“You could save some of those nicknames for Tom, you know,” he mumbled, muzzle warm again.

“Trust me, she does,” Tom said, coming to her side as she straightened back up. He kissed her quickly. “We’ll be back soon.”

“Have fun.”

“We will.”

And they did. It was harder to be worried about dumb secrets when there were power tools to fawn over and tomato plants to select and pizza to eat. He wondered how long until they could tell him. Why they thought they *couldn’t* just yet. Wondered, but didn’t worry.

Later that night, Maddie sat on the couch, laptop open. Sonic had gone to bed two hours ago. They’d gone through the usual ‘pay the toll’ routine for hugs after Parks & Rec, and then he’d negotiated for an extra hour reading Percy Jackson in his room. Things seemed to be better, now that they’d realized their too-obvious hush-hush act was throwing a wrench in everything. He’d seemed much happier climbing the attic stairs that night than he had the night before.

She’d watched the sliver of light peeking through the attic door go dark as she’d made tea. She’d intended to turn in for the night once she was done. But Tom had settled in next to her and put on ESPN, so she stayed on her computer. As happened more often than not these days, she’d gotten caught up in conversations in the facebook group for adoptive parents she’d joined. The tea went cold on the end table. She was finally, finally starting to talk herself into powering down when her email notification pinged. “Hon.”

“Hmmwha?” Tom raised his head up from where it had lolled onto the back of the couch cushions, blinking at her.

“We’ve got an email from Judge Ramirez.”

“Yeah?” A bit more alert, he straightened up.

“We need to submit to home visits.”

“Come again?”

She shifted, turning the screen so he could see. “Before we can finalize anything. The state needs to send out a social worker.”

“To do what?”

“See if we’re fit parents.” Her words were just a bit too tired to be snarky and came out petulant instead.

He put a hand on her thigh, squeezed. “People who get drunk and get pregnant in the backseat of a car have no idea how easy they’ve got it.”

“Right?” Her nose wrinkled as a small smile flashed briefly across her face. “But it’s not just us.”

Tom opened his mouth to ask for elaboration, but it was suddenly full of cotton.

Maddie cleared her throat. “They need to talk to him too.”

“They what?”

“S’what it says. Ramirez says she pulled some strings to get them to assign someone local.”

Her husband swallowed thickly. “So someone who...”

“Who probably already knows...or at least has some inkling that he’s...not like other kids.”

“Oh.” Tom blinked, rolling the new information around in his head, trying to guess which parent of a middle-schooler, which attendee of the Green Hills Junior League games, which shopper at Albertson’s it could possibly be. He knew everyone, didn’t he? “Well that’s...good news, right?”

“I guess.” Maddie pulled the computer back into her lap, closing down her tabs. She’d send a response in the morning. “I mean, no, yeah, it is. It is.”

“...But?”

“But it means we’ve gotta tell him.” She closed the computer, the room around them dimming. “Soon, before this person shows up at our door with a clipboard and a million questions about if we feed him enough vegetables.”

“Do we?”

“What?”

“Feed him enough vegetables?”

Maddie gave him a pointed look.

Tom’s laugh was sleepy and slow. “Relax, Mads. We knew we were gonna hafta tell him eventually.”

“I know. I don’t know why this is freaking me out all of a sudden.” She moved the laptop to the coffee table, gestured with her now-free hands. “This is what we want, and what he wants. It’s good. All of it. But it just seems too...too big.”

“Too big?”

“To just, just bring up over breakfast, I mean. Right?”

Thomas pushed himself up off the couch with a groan that was only mildly embarrassing. “Maybe. Maybe not. Let’s sleep on it, ok?” He offered her his hand, which she took, and then he pulled her to her feet and into his arms. “We’ll figure it out tomorrow.”

With her cheek pressed against his shoulder, she nodded. “Tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

In the words of Mushu the Dragon, "I LIVE!!!!"

For real though, I know it's been AGES, but thanks to those leaked pics and videos from the set of the sequel, I got to chatting with @Humanities_Handbag about this story and she had the brilliant idea to team up to get it finished! And, because when she and I write together, things just BALLOON like crazy (in the BEST way), this chapter is getting split into TWO PARTS!

So, for now, I hope you enjoyed Part 1 and hopefully Part 2 won't be too far behind!

The First Time He Didn't Hold Back - Part 2

Chapter Summary

In which a plan goes awry, a secret is revealed, and some big words are finally spoken aloud.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day, they made a plan.

A good plan.

A great plan.

At work, Tom emailed Maddie a link to a company that made professional-grade baseball jerseys for kids. Under the link, he simply wrote, *'Wachowski?'*

She sent him back *'OMG YES DO IT!'*

And it was done.

The company had a 'Rush Delivery' option that cost an extra $25 that they didn't think twice about. Maddie actually called and requested nondescript packaging as well. Tom put in an order for a cake at Macey's Bakery (swearing Macey herself to secrecy). Wade overheard him and had to be sworn to secrecy as well, and then invited to the unveiling as payment for his silence. Then, since Wade was invited, more calls had to go out. To Rachel and JoJo. To both of their parents.

Over the week it took for the jersey to arrive, it all came together. An intimate gathering, with their closest family (and Wade). A culmination of nearly nine months of work.

It was going to be perfect.

It *was* .

If not for the fact that, a week before the date they'd set, when they were already five minutes past when they should've been in the car to go to an away game one town over, Sonic announced he didn't have his spare jersey in his bag.

Tom had put the minivan back in 'park' and run back into the house. One scramble in the laundry room later and they were on their way.

And neither of them thought any more about it. They arrived at the ballpark and barely had time to tell Sonic 'Go get 'em!' before the game began. They embarrassedly excused their way up to the very top of the 'visitors' bleachers.

Maddie sank down with a sigh. “How is it,” she said, “that we’ve got the fastest kid in the world, and we’re still almost *always* late for everything?”

Tom chuckled, standing as he gazed out at the lit diamond. “I feel like that’s just a universal kid thing, superspeed or no.”

She nodded, shifting on the hard metal bench, trying in vain to get comfortable. “You’re probably right.”

“I usually am.”

She smacked him in the back pocket of his jeans. They exchanged a grin, and then turned their attention back to the game.

The home team was a good one, one they’d certainly be seeing again if they made it to the playoffs. The innings breezed by. The sun fully set, but the humidity lingered in the park. Maddie unzipped the duffel bag and poked around for her water bottle. She pushed past extra cleats, the first aid kit, Sonic’s spare jersey-

Wait.

“Tom…”

“He’s doing pretty good out there,” said Tom, putting his hands on his hips (a move she’d made fun of him for more than a few times; *that’s a dad pose if I’ve ever seen one*). “They put him on second base yet? He’s been asking for a new placement.”

“*Tom* …”

“And how’s he been running? We’ve been practicing with the speed gun-” Tom was cut off when something hit his knee. He looked down, hands still on his hips, to see what had hit him. It was the jersey. That his darling wife had swung at him. Hard. “Ow?”

She gave him a look.

“What?”

Holding the shirt by its shoulders, she let the other half drop, and he was treated to an eyeful of the back of Sonic’s brand new jersey.

He blinked. “Oh,” said Tom. “Oh *shit*.”

“Tom.”

“Yup,” he croaked. “Yeah, no. I see it.”

“You grabbed the wrong jersey.”

“I did,” he said, voice thin. There was an unsteady feeling prickling on the back of his neck. “Totally. I did that. That is what I- yes. Well. Okay. Okay okay okay-”

“Tom!”

He snapped to attention, reaching down to grab the duffel bag. “Hold on. Hold *on* . I think- it must be in here!”

He searched through. There was a half empty gatorade bottle. A set of extra house keys. An extra pair of batting gloves. A roll of tape.

“It’s *gotta* be here,” he said, like a magician realizing he left his rabbit at home. “I grabbed it! I swear!”

“I told you-!”

“Hold on, it’s gotta be… no, no, not… Maybe here?”

The side pocket had nothing but a frayed phone charger and packets of ketchup.

Maddie scrubbed her face, pressing the heels of her hands into her eyes before pulling back to glare at him. “I told you not to put it in with the regular laundry.”

“Dammit.” He dropped the duffel. “That’s the only one we’ve got.”

“It’s *not*,” she snapped, staring down at the thing in her hands. “There’s another one, but that’s probably still sitting in a laundry basket at home.”

“Okay,” he said again, sounding less like a broken record and more like a record that had been thrown out the window of a burning house. “Okay. Okay okay okay. This is fine. This is *fine* . We can- We can improvise!”

“*Thomas*.”

He winced. “… Madeline?”

“*Thomas*,” she said again, skillfully turning both syllables of his name into a threat. “You brought our *adoption jersey* to a Junior League baseball game. That his team is *losing*.”

“They’re losing?”

She glared.

“Right. Yes. Sorry.”

She gave the jersey another waggle.

It was *exactly* as they’d ordered it. Freshly stitched, with real leather lettering spelling out, clear as day, ‘WACHOWSKI’.

“We can’t do this here, Thomas.”

“I mean. We could…?”

“We *can’t*.”

“It’s not that bad.” He looked out over the spotlit field, over a small ocean's worth of parents; the bleachers shone with bleached blonde hair and iPhone cameras, cheering and hollering as the teams

switched spots from infield to out. The team with the orange jerseys (the Butte Batters) began to wander towards the batting cage. The Green Hills Home Runners moved towards the dugout. It was easy to see their kid in the mix of green and white home color, still covered in a healthy mix of gatorade and dugout dirt.

He was animatedly talking to Jeremy, the two of them grabbing water bottles from their bags, wiping sweat off their palms.

Tom could even see Jeremy's mother, Cheryll, on the first steps of the bleachers. She saw him looking and waved, her dark curls bouncing around. There was a cooler at her feet. It must have been her week for orange slices.

Tom waved back forlornly.

The coach blew his whistle and the away team began to huddle, choosing their starters. Cheryll turned away.

"It wouldn't be the worst place it was done," he said, trying not to sound too despondent. "I mean, it's not what we *planned*-."

"I'm aware. Rachel and Jojo and my parents are all flying out for the announcement. *Next week*."

"Yeah…" He cleared his throat. "It could still work here though, right? I mean. He really loves baseball. Could be a win."

"I am *not* telling my son he's being adopted next to a hot dog cart, Thomas."

"Right. Point taken."

She looked down at the bleachers. The teams were still switching. It would be another minute. "There's no time to drive back."

"He could… run? And get it?"

"He'd know something was up! We only have *two*."

Tom waved towards the limp jersey in her hand. "So hide this one!"

"Where, Thomas. *Where*?"

"I don't-" He glanced down and saw that Sonic's eyes had met his. "Dammit. He's coming. Why is he coming?"

"*Thomas*."

“Just…” He pushed the jersey towards her, “hide it!”

“Where!”

“I don’t- *Sonic!”*

Sonic was next to them before they could blink. A few of the spectators’ hair was still fluttering from where he’d passed, blinking up at him. Some of the away parents (who had been emailed in advance about the peculiarity of one of the home-team members) were glancing owl-eyed up at them until their spouse or kid pulled their attention away.

“Did you see that slide I did!” He was bouncing on his toes. The jersey he was wearing was smeared in dust and grass. There was turn stuck in his fur just below his ear. "Pretty cool, right?"

“Sure was, bud,” said Tom (a half truth - it was hard to pay attention and panic at the same time), stepping carefully in front of Maddie while she tried to shove the jersey under her legs. “And your running’s getting better! Keeping in stride with everyone else?”

“I still think I could win it all for them.”

“Yeah, well, superpowers wouldn’t make the games any fun.”

“They’re just afraid of how awesome I am,” Sonic quipped back, bouncing on his heels, jogging on the bleachers. “So did you bring the extra jersey! Look at this one! I totally tore it up. Sorry about that, by the way. But totally not sorry because *that slide was amazing*. Just wish we weren’t losing right now, but we’ll bat again.”

“Uh huh,” said Tom, watching Maddie try to compose herself. “That’s great, bud.”

“Totally,” said Sonic. “So… the extra jersey?”

“Wouldn’t you know,” said Tom, “I forgot that at home.”

The hedgehog quirked an eyebrow. “Really? After you ran back inside to get it?”

Tom’s smile slanted towards a grimace. “‘Fraid so. It’s not in the bag.”

Green eyes scanned the area quickly and then he snickered, pointing. “Well, no wonder. Maddie’s sitting on it.”

On the bench, the town vet let out the most forced, unconvincing laugh any of them had ever heard.

Beside her, Tom glanced down, gears turning. “Hey *yeah*. Would you look at that? How’d it get there, honey?”

Right eye twitching, she valiantly kept her smile in place. “I don’t know, *honey.*”

Sonic glanced between them. “Well, I kinda gotta get back, so if I could just…” He reached for the jersey, only to have Maddie tuck it further under her legs. He blinked. “Sorry, Pretzel Lady, I know the seats aren’t that comfy, but that’s why I told you guys to invest in those cushion things at the start of the season.”

“Kid’s got a point, babe,” Tom said, reaching down to squeeze her shoulder.

She rolled her shoulder out of his grip, gritting her teeth as she tugged the jersey out from it’s failed hiding place. Doing her best to hold it so the back was folded in on itself, she offered it to the boy. “Right. Sorry.”

“No problem. I bet you could get ‘em in time for next game if you ordered ‘em from Amazon,” Sonic said, changing so quickly his arms were a blur. The torn one ended up in Tom’s arms without him reaching for it. “Liam’s dad even has one that’s got cup holders so, like, you guys could really be doing this in style, ya know? Gotta up your game if you’re representing the star player, right? I know, I know, ‘no *I* in team’, I’ll stop. Anyway, I gotta go, thanks for the jersey, love you guys, we can still get ice cream even if we don’t win, right? Okay, see ya later!” And with another rush of wind, he was back in the dug-out.

Maddie let her jaws unclench at last.

He hadn’t noticed.

But he *would*.

It was only a matter of *when*.

“There. See? S’all good,” Tom said, hands back on his hips.

She punched him in the back of the knee, making him buckle.

Maddie and Tom spent the next inning in a tense silence. They watched the players line up. They watched Sonic take second base, calling something out to third.

They waited for him to notice.

“Any minute now,” Maddie hissed to Tom. “Any minute now, he’s going to see it, and then you’ll need to scrape an emotional kid off second base.”

“ *Me*?”

“Yes, *you*.”

“Why me!”

“Pretty sure it’s a commandment, Tom. He who bungles surprise plans and throws his wife beneath a bus must drag emotional boys from dugouts.”

“That doesn’t sound real…”

“Thomas.”

“Oh yeah,” said Tom, quickly. “That commandment. Forgot.”

She nodded and aggressively shoved a handful of popcorn into her mouth.

They watched and waited as the inning began and ended.

He didn’t notice.

Sonic high-fived the other players. His team had lost, but only by a little. Three fouls and a caught fly ball had helped even things out.

He still didn’t notice.

Jeremy met up with him on the field while the players collected their bags.

He still didn’t notice.

Tom started to say, *looks like we might be lucky after all!* but Maddie shot him a look that kept him quiet until Sonic was back at their sides, listing off the closest ice cream parlors and asking if Jeremy could *please* come with them because they didn’t really get to hang out that week, throwing his bag at Tom to hold and calling out to his friend before either of them could answer.

Which was how they wound up in a booth at Sundae School with Cheryll, having been told by the teenage boys in a completely *separate* booth that sitting together wasn’t cool. Tom had tried to argue that ‘guys who are too cool to sit with their parents should pay for their *own* ice cream’ but that argument had tanked harder than *Generation Um*... (Sonic would have resented that; any

movie was lucky to have Keanu Reeves, even if the movie couldn't pull above 0% on Rotten Tomatoes), so he shilled out the $20 and let the kids enjoy their sundaes.

"It's not so bad." Cheryll pulled napkins out of the dispenser, digging her spoon into the cup of strawberry sorbet. "I love the kid, but after a few minutes-"

"Oh God, yes." Maddie blinked, as if she didn't expect the words to come out of her. "Sorry. Is that bad?"

Cheryll laughed. "No. Not bad. We all need time away from one another. I'm sure that one's got your hands full. Teenagers are a whole ball field on their own. I can barely keep up. Can't even imagine a teenager with *powers*."

"It's pretty much exactly the same," Maddie said between a glob of ice cream. "We barely notice the speed anymore. We're too busy with the practices and schedules and mood swings-"

"He's good most of the time," Tom interjected. "99% of the time."

"He is," agreed Maddie.

"So here's to the 1%, when we just need to sit in the parents' booth."

Tom raised his own cup. "To the parents' booth."

Their cups clinked in the middle, grinning.

In a booth nearby, they could hear the boys having their own conversation.

"That last pitch *totally* should've been a ball," Jeremy was saying. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand, brown hair still sticking to his forehead right above a red line leftover from his baseball hat.

"Right?? It went so far past the plate, I don't think the bat would've touched it even if I *had* swung!" Sonic nodded, gesturing wildly with his spoon, swinging it dramatically like a baseball bat.

"Total B.S. call."

Cheryll cleared her throat loudly.

Her son looked over. "What! I didn't actually say it!"

She gave him a look and he rolled his eyes.

"*Moms*," he muttered.

Sonic caught Maddie's eye at that, giving her an innocent *I-Would-Never* look.

She winked at him, and he ducked his head back towards his double chocolate chip. "I dunno. They're not so bad…" she heard him say under his breath.

Maddie smiled into her own vanilla swirl and blinked back tears.

She seemed to be doing that a lot lately.

The kid had his moments.

Cheryll's voice drew them back as she told the two fledgling parents about a great baseball camp just a town over that she'd already signed Jeremy up for. They nodded at the right moments, silently going through their finances wondering what they could afford to make sure his first calm summer with them was a good one.

It started to seem like the night might actually end without any major life changes. A normal, post-game night. They'd go into his room after he was asleep and swap out the jerseys.

It would be fine. All *fine*.

Just as she was about to try and steal a spoonful of Tom's rocky road, the both of them heard it.

"I like your new jersey, by the way."

Tom froze.

Maddie nearly dropped her spoon.

Cheryll looked between the two of them.

"It's just my jersey," Sonic said, licking ice cream off his thumb. "We got them at the same time."

"Nah, man. That one's new. See?" He reached across and flicked Sonic's chest, right against the logo for their team. "That's real leather. I don't even have that." He pulled at his own jersey to show Sonic what he meant. His was printed onto the porous polyester.

"Oh. Yeah…" Sonic frowned. "I didn't even notice."

"*How?*"

"I don't know. It was… there was a lot going on. I just grabbed it."

"I asked my mom for one of those. She said not until my birthday, because they're expensive. Super professional grade. Is that why you got yours? I thought your birthday was in June."

"It is," said Sonic, slowly. "They didn't say so, though."

"Early birthday present, maybe."

Sonic nodded. "Probably," he said.

"Lucky. Nice of them to change the name, too." Jeremy took a huge bite of ice cream. A blob of chocolate syrup fell off and landed on the table. "It was weird saying *Hedgehog* every time we wanted to get your attention."

"Wasn't."

"Was."

"*Wasn't!"*

“Was! It was a pain in the a-”

Cheryll cleared her throat again.

Jeremy groaned. “Just saying. Glad they changed it.”

“Hedgehog is the easiest- wait? They *changed* it?” The hedgehog twisted, as if he could see the back of his jersey if he tried hard enough. “Huh,” he said, giving up and twisting back.

Maddie grabbed Tom’s knee hard enough to make him jump.

“You didn’t notice that?”

“I wasn’t really stopping to take in the sights. What’d they change it to?”

Jeremy snorted, taking a massive bite of melting ice cream. “Wa’ u’ you ‘ean?”

“What?”

He swallowed. “I said, what do you mean?”

“What did they *change* it to?”

“What else would they change it to!” Jeremy laughed. “Your last name, Wachowski!”

Sonic blinked.

The human boy tapped his spoon to his cheek thoughtfully, and unwittingly streaked his face with chocolate. “It’ll be great to call you that instead of Hedgehog. Seriously. So much better. I can finally say *Wachowski, fly ball!* Gonna be so much better. They should change your other jersey, too. Mikey had to change his last year when his parents split up. He’s totally cool with it though. Says his dad was a real doofus and his step-dad is *so* much nicer. Adopted him and everything. Now he’s got a whole new name on his jersey, so that’s cool. Pretty sure even Roanan had to change *his* when his parents got married.” Jeremy took a breath to lick off his spoon. “Wonder why they changed your name *now* . Could’ve done it when you first ordered the gear.”

Maddie’s nails were digging through Tom’s jeans.

“This is it,” Tom muttered. “God, Maddie…”

Cheryll’s eyes were on both of them, narrowed.

Sonic blinked again. The two adults held their breath. And then;

“Huh,” Sonic said, shrugging. “Not sure.”

“Probably just a name-thing,” his friend replied. “Danny Glickman had his first name on his jersey *forever* until coach called the company and chewed them out. Got it fixed in a week.”

“Oh, yeah.” Sonic nodded. “Coach keeps filling out my forms with my parents’ name anyway. I keep telling him it’s not the same, but he’s gonna do what he’s gonna do. It’s probably better than Hedgehog anyway.”

"*Definitely* better," crowed Jeremy. "S'why it doesn't say *Human* on the back of my jersey. That would be *dumb*."

Sonic threw a cherry at him. Jeremy threw a napkin back.

The adults threw them looks before a full-blown food fight could erupt in the little booth. The two kids went back to their ice cream, tails between their legs.

Maddie let go of Tom's leg, bumping her shoulder against his.

Cheryll kept watching.

The ice cream was almost gone by 9 pm.

It was a Friday night, so Tom and Maddie let the clock tick on. Sonic and Jeremy were too deep into a conversation about fortnite anyway, and they didn't want to interrupt.

Tom ordered a round of terrible coffees for the table, happily settling back against the booth, an arm around his wife's shoulder.

Cheryll wiped her hands free of sorbet and took a sip of bad coffee. "So," she said, putting down the mug before leaning forward, arms crossed on the table. "When are you going to tell him?"

Maddie paused with her water cup half-way to her lips. "Um, tell him what?"

The other woman raised an eyebrow. "That you're adopting h-" She was shushed so hurriedly by both of them that she actually laughed. "Oh for pete's sake. Really?"

"We had a *plan*," Tom said, voice low.

"A *great* plan," Maddie added.

"Some free advice for you," Cheryll said, still grinning. "Kids and plans rarely work out. Derek and I took Jeremy and Olivia to Disney last summer, and we didn't tell them until we were getting off the plane. Told them we were going to go see the Everglades to throw them off the scent. And wouldn't you know? I wound up with two kids on a shuttle to the Art of Animation Hotel bawling their eyes out that they weren't going to get to see any alligators."

Tom winced. "Yikes."

"I'm so sorry," Maddie said.

Cheryll shook her head. "They got it out of their system after a day and had a blast, but that big, momentous reveal we were hoping for? Out the window. All our 'great plan' did was mess with their heads, which wasn't what we'd been aiming for." She picked up her styrofoam cup and swirled its contents. "Sometimes, it's better just to be straight with your kids. *Most* times, really."

The Wachowskis looked at each other.

"But it's *such* a big thing," Maddie said.

“Bigger than Disney,” Tom agreed.

“You guys are putting too much pressure on yourselves,” the other woman said, taking a small sip of decaf that was quickly going cold. “Yes, this is an *important* thing, but that’s all the more reason to forgo the rigamarole and just *talk* to him.”

The hand Tom had on Maddie’s shoulder squeezed, his thumb grazing the skin beneath her t-shirt sleeve. “You’re right. Of course you’re right.”

Cheryll smiled. “I’ve just been doing this a bit longer than you two have.”

Maddie reached up to lay a hand over Tom’s. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.” Another sip of coffee and then she added. “No really. You can text me whenever. I might not have all the answers, but I’ve got some. And,” she added balling up one of the napkins nearest her elbow, “you two are always welcome to stop over. I have your son with me once a week already. He and Jeremy have practically carved out their own man cave playing video games in the basement. You may as well join. It would give me an excuse to open the good wine.”

Tom laughed. “That sounds great.”

“And I’ve got a Baseball Moms group chat you should totally be on, Maddie.”

“I’d love that.”

“Done.” Cheryll smiled and glanced across the aisle. Sonic and Jeremy were both yawning, losing track of their stories about that night's game, rambling on around the point and ending each sentence with a bleary *wait… uh… what was I saying again?* “Now, I think I’d better get my little all-star home before it gets too late and he passes out in the car. Carrying him isn’t nearly as fun as it used to be.”

“Eh, I don’t know,” said Tom, nudging Maddie. “It’s not that bad.”

Cheryll laughed. “It isn’t,” she agreed. “Only so long we get them this young. Best to enjoy it.” She tapped the table twice with her hand, beginning to stand. She paused midway to lean closer across the table. “Congratulations,” she whispered. “Truly. It’s… a great thing. He’s a great kid. You’re all very, very lucky.” Her smile quirked again. “Just don’t forget to take a picture or two. You might not be able to have a surprise, but there’s no shame in recording all the best moments. My phone is leaking out the ears.” She pulled back again, twisting towards the booth across the aisle. “C’mon, Jeremy. Your bed awaits.”

“Not tired,” moaned Jeremy.

“Speak for yourself,” muttered Sonic, rubbing his eyes. “S’bedtime.”

“Weak.”

“I’m the fastest hedgehog alive. You’re weak.”

“I beat you twice in 1v1 last week. *You’re* weak.”

“No *you’re* weak!”

“No *you’re*-!”

“Boys,” said Maddie, effectively putting an end to the spat.

The parents collected their children, bid goodbye in the parking lot (with Jeremy and Sonic already making plans for the next week to try out a new game), and drove their cars into the waiting dark.

It was nearly 10 pm as Tom’s ‘loser cruiser’ rolled down the wood-lined road towards home. Their house appeared, windows glittering in the beams of headlights. Gravel crunched and rumbled as Tom slowed their car to a stop. They could just hear Ozzie barking *welcome back* from the living room.

Tom turned the key. The engine went quiet.

From the backseat, Sonic stifled a yawn. “If more losses could end like this, I don’t think I’d mind losing so much.” He undid the buckle of the seatbelt and moved for the door handle. When he tugged, the door stayed firmly shut. “Huh?”

Between the driver’s and passenger’s seats, he watched Tom reach over and squeeze Maddie’s leg, and then they were both turning towards him. His stomach did an uncomfortable flip, and all of Jeremy’s perfectly-reasoned arguments from before when straight out the window, replaced with paralyzing fear. “Did they find me? Were we not careful enough? I can move my stuff back to my cave. They didn’t try to hurt you, did-”

“Whoa, whoa, buddy, slow down,” Tom said, reaching between the seats to grasp his forearm. “What’re you talking about?”

“That general; the one with the gift card. He came back, that’s what all the sneaking and whispering was about, right? I swear, if he tried to hurt you- I should go, I should-” He tugged at the door handle again, but it was still locked.

“Sonic, calm down,” Maddie said quickly, her smile tinged with concern. “Nobody’s trying to hurt us. I *promise.*”

“But I thought-”

“We *promise*,” Tom echoed her.

“Take a breath, baby, please,” Maddie said.

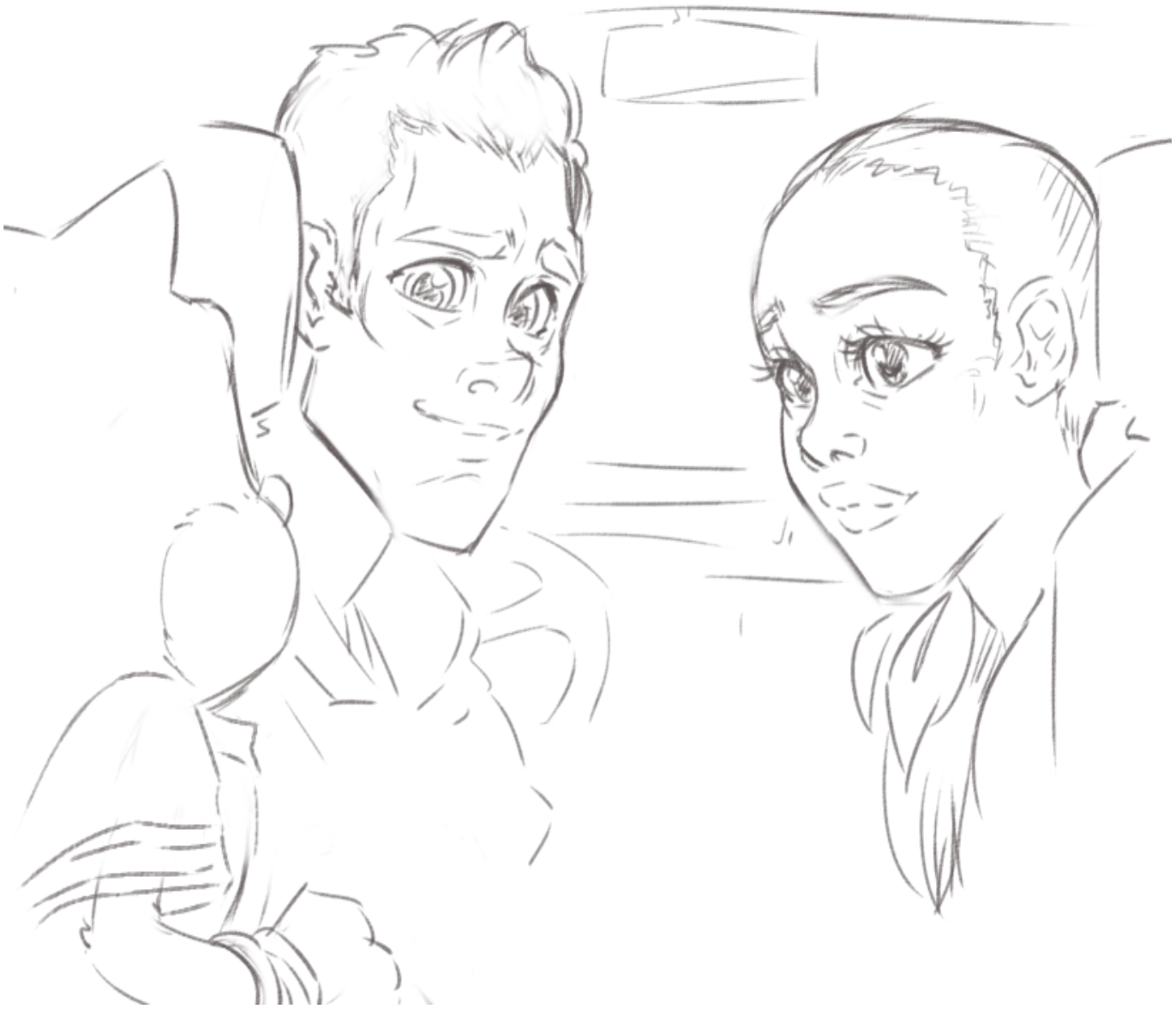
He did. A shaky one. Then another. “We’re okay?”

“We’re okay,” Tom said. “But we *were* sneaking and whispering,” he continued, his own smile dripping with guilt.

“Which, in hindsight, we never should have been doing,” Maddie added. “There’s something we want to talk about, though.”

Gloved hands gripped the booster seat armrests as he asked, “And it’s, uh, a good something?”

The adults exchanged a look and Tom said, “We certainly think so.”



His grip loosened, now more curious than nervous. “So… what, then?”

Maddie undid her seatbelt and twisted more fully in her seat. She stretched out a hand and tugged on the hem of his jersey. “So Jeremy was right about this. It *was* supposed to be a present.”

He glanced down at the green fabric, the fancy leather stitching. “For my birthday, right? Is that why you were trying to hide it? It was supposed to be a surprise?”

“It *was*,” she said. “But not for your birthday. We were going to give it to you next week, but your father does the laundry with his eyes closed, apparently.”

Tom started to protest, but she glared at him and he held up both hands defensively. “You know, I’d argue, but arguing with your mother rarely does me any good.”

Sonic watched them both, smiling. His hands slipped down from the armrests, folding comfortably in his lap. They’d been doing that for a little while now; referring to each other that way.

Can you bring this to your father, sweetheart Maddie had said just a week ago, handing over a bowl full of pretzels when Sonic had zipped through the kitchen.

Can you get your mom, bud? Tom had asked when he'd walked up the steps after work.

Even the neighbors had started to get in on it. It was a strange thrill when he passed Ms. Prudence's house down the way, only to have the sweet older lady in the yellow cardigan hand over mail with a shake of her head. *"This got mixed up in my deliveries, dear. Could you bring it to your parents?"*

It was wonderfully weird. He never wanted them to stop.

"Anyway," Maddie was saying, while Tom still chuckled beside her. "Jeremy was right about something else, too. We changed the name on purpose."

"Not that 'Hedgehog' isn't a great name," Tom added, undoing his own seatbelt so he could twist around as well.

"We just thought, *hoped,* that you'd like to share *our* family name," Maddie said. Her hand fell on the Sonic's grass-stained knee. "Since we'll be making you an official part of our family."

He blinked at her, gears turning in his tired brain.

Family.

The big word crashed around him like it always did.

"Aren't we already?" It sounded dumb, but it tumbled out of his mouth regardless.

The hand on his knee squeezed tight.

"Of course we are," Maddie said.

"Just have to cross our 'i's and dot our 't's," Tom said, grinning.

"What?"

"There's paperwork," Maddie said.

"*Soooo* much paperwork," Tom said.

"It's just the way it works on Earth," Maddie explained. When he blinked at her again, she pinched his knee. "You remember *Annie*?"

"The one Tom cried at?"

"In my defence, I cry at a *lot* of movies."

Maddie laughed softly. "Well, when she first came to stay, it was just for a short time, but by the end, Warbucks asked her to stay for always. He wanted to adopt her."

"*That's* what that means?" Sonic was watching the hand on his knee, his own fingers itching to grab hold of them, but he stayed still. "To- to stay for always?"

“If we jump through the right hoops,” Tom said. “And answer the right questions. You’d be as much ours as Jeremy is Cheryll’s.”

Maddie’s thumb was moving back and forth across his fur. “With or without this, you’d stay,” she added. “We knew it wasn’t going to be easy to file because of our situation, so if it all falls through, you’ll still be ours. Always. But if all goes as planned, this makes things more official. Legal.”

He swallowed. “So what changes?”

“Nothing, really,” Maddie said. “We’ll need to call your school for a new ID. Medical information for doctors visits are going to need to be adjusted. We’ll have to file taxes differently. And we’ll need to get all your jerseys changed. But once the process is done, things will be pretty much the same.”

“Then… why go to all the trouble?” he found himself asking. There was an awful weight right behind his chest that he was trying to ignore.

The pair paused to look at each other, but when they turned back, they were still smiling. Maddie lifted her hand from his knee and curled her fingers around his. “Because we love you.”

“What more reason do we need?” Tom shrugged, but his voice hitched and he cleared his throat.

And that was it.

He’d been pretty proud of himself, keeping it together, letting it all wash over him.

But that hitch in Tom’s - in his *father’s* - voice.

That was it.

He managed a wobbly, “You *guys*...” before his throat felt too tight for any more words. His fur was staticy and his eyes were wet.

Maddie squeezed his hand. “How about we go inside?” she offered. Her eyes were shining in the dim light from the porch. “We could show you the paperwork, if you want.”

He nodded.

Through the roaring in his ears, he heard the doors *click* to unlock.

His legs weren’t working like they should have. He dropped from his seat, catching himself against the back of Maddie’s. He wanted to make some excuse, a silly quip to explain it away, but all that he managed was a little noise before clamping his jaw.

He didn’t move until Tom rounded to his side and opened the door, offering his arms. “C’mere, bud.”

As a general rule, unless he was sick, or hurt, Sonic didn't let them carry him. And even that was conditional. The first time he'd sprained his ankle at practice a few weeks ago, he'd hobbled into

the house snapping at anyone who offered that *I can do it on my own!* Sometimes he drifted off on the couch and was in bed the next morning, but it was something he had deemed 'for little kids', one of which he was not. And in this moment, he was neither sick, nor hurt, nor asleep, but he leaned forward into Tom's grasp without hesitation.

"Is it just all the gear, or did you have a growth spurt or something?" The soft, teasing words were murmured as he was hoisted up. He shook his head, then laid his cheek on the man's shoulder, breathing in leather and cut grass and sugar glaze.

They talked quietly above his head as they closed up the car.

"You got the bag?"

"Yup. Can you get the door?"

"Keys are in my back pocket."

"I got 'em."

"Thanks, babe."

He was jostled a little as Ozzie barreled out to greet them on the porch. Maddie ushered the retriever back inside, promising a walk later, and Tom followed after.

They didn't bother to turn the downstairs lights on. He watched, blurry eyed over Tom's shoulder, at the slats of light across the living room, the couch they sat on for movie night, the coffee table where he did his homework. He felt someone undo the laces on his cleats, slipping them and his socks off. His batting gloves were next.

"Help him take this off upstairs," Maddie whispered, and he felt her tug at the back of his jersey. "We'll do laundry tomorrow."

Above his head, Tom nodded.

Maddie's footsteps faded off to the mudroom while Tom's ascended the steps.

"You think you could handle a shower, bud?"

He shook his head.

"Then that'll be a tomorrow thing."

Tom passed the bathroom. And then the attic.

"… you-" Sonic began before his voice caught. He went quiet, pushing back a lump at the base of his throat, pointing weakly to the attic steps instead.

Tom kept walking until they were at the end of the hall.

Sonic didn't even realize where they were until he was being carefully pried off and lowered to sit on a bed.

It was dark. But he could just make out two closets, two bedside tables, a few framed pictures scattered here and there. He wiped at his blurry eyes as Tom kneeled in front of him, squeezing his elbow. “Arms up.”

He lifted his arms, and the jersey went up over his head and was thrown into the hamper next to one of the adjoining dressers.

“Give me one second,” Tom said, quietly.

Sonic nodded, closing his eyes, counting every second of his yoga breaths. There was the sound of dresser drawers sliding open and closed, and then footsteps out the door.

And then quiet.

He blinked again.

Their room.

He was in their room.

The room that felt like an island in a vast sea.

The room that he'd stood outside of long after everyone had gone to sleep, but never dared enter without express permission, tip-toeing through, barely touching anything.

Moonlight cut through the french doors of the deck. They’d left the curtains open, and the walls glowed blue.

He rubbed his nose, sniffling into the heel of his hand. It still felt wrong to be here, sitting on their bed, waiting for them both to show up. Like he was some intruder into a place he didn’t wholly belong.

Down the hall he heard soft voices. A bathroom door opened and closed. Someone else walked down the stairs. The shower began to run.

He should be doing something. He smelled like dirt and there was chocolate ice cream in his fur. He was going to get their bed - *their bed* - all dirty. He should’ve said yes to the shower. But his legs still felt like lead, so he stayed put, just listening to the sounds of the house.

Maddie arrived first wearing pajamas, her hair in a silk scarf. She sat on the edge of her side of the bed and reached out to press her hand against his back. “You alright, Sonic?”

He crawled towards her, knees sinking into the mattress, and settled against her side.

“Kiddo?”

From down the hall, he heard the shower stop running. After a few minutes, soft footsteps moved outside of the bathroom. He heard something creak, too, and softly *thud* . The attic stairs, he realized.

Maddie’s palm, up and down his back, dragged him to reality again. “What’s the matter, Baby?”

He opened his mouth but closed it again, shutting his eyes tight and pressing his face into her pajamas.

Nothing was wrong. The world felt like it was swallowing him whole and he had an entire ocean inside his chest. But nothing was wrong.

“It’s a lot.” She spoke for him, guessing and hitting the mark.

He nodded into her shoulder.

“That’s alright. A lot is fine.” Her own voice was getting tighter. He could hear it, like guitar strings pulled taut.

His own voice was rough and barely audible beyond the threat of tears when he softly asked, “Maddie?”

“A lot for me too, sweetheart,” she said by way of an answer. “A good a lot. A great a lot.” She kissed between his ears. “We love you. So much. You know that?”

He pressed welling eyes into her sleeve.

“We should get used to crying tonight, huh?”

He nodded again. She bundled him closer.

Tom was the next to arrive in boxers and a worn t-shirt. His hair was damp, and he smelled like tea tree oil and mint. He flicked on his bedside light before sitting next to his wife and son. He had a wet washcloth in one hand and in the other, an old *Starsky & Hutch* t-shirt that had been his in high school. Now Sonic’s favorite nightshirt, given to him in the early days, along with a number of other things that had been in the attic before they’d converted it. Tom laid the shirt on the bed and raised the washcloth up. “Look at me for a sec, bud.”

Sonic turned his face up just enough for Tom to scrub the dried hot fudge from his cheeks. “Thanks,” he mumbled quietly into the damp terry cloth.

“Course,” Tom said. He tossed the washcloth in the hamper and stood. “Now. How ‘bout you and mom scoot back and get comfy and I’ll pull out the miles of red tape we’ve been working through. Hmm?”

Maddie got him into the too-big t-shirt and then drew him along with her back to lean against the pillows and the headboard.

The files were almost in plain sight, brought out in a thick, yellow envelope postmarked for weeks before. Not that he would have looked.

It was their room.

And yet, as Tom emptied the files, carefully laying them out, stacking them into neat piles, Maddie kept him there like he belonged there just as much as she did.

“You got this a while ago.” His voice was still wobbly, but he could at least speak a little if he remembered to breathe between each sentence. He picked up the folder.

Maddie combed her fingers through his quills, picking out little bits of turf from his slide. "Mmmhm. Longer than that, if you count Tom's trip to the courthouse."

He was almost afraid to ask. He did anyway. "How… how long ago-?"

"Since the beginning of winter, about."

He swallowed back another larger lump and bit down on his cheek.

"We weren't kidding when we said a lot of paperwork." Tom picked up the first pile, clipped with a bright orange paperclip. There were red, vinyl sticky notes throughout with notes on them. *Sign here. Initial here. Reread. Redo.*

"Oh crap." Maddie's voice lost its softness for a moment as she reached out to take the packet. "I forgot; we've got to redo the third section."

"You're kidding me."

"Ramirez called about it." She clicked her tongue. "The signatures don't match."

"You're *kidding* me." Tom ran a hand through his hair and blew out a short *huff* . "That's tomorrow then, I guess." He lay down the packet. "Welcome to the last few month's of our life, kiddo," he said. "A lot of this. Just filing and writing." He pointed to each in turn, introducing them like a set of particularly annoying friends. "Tax forms, change of name, background checks, proof of employment, proof of residency-"

"That's a lot…" Sonic found his voice again. His eyes were burning, but they'd at least let up a little in the face of the mundane paperwork in front of him. "I didn't know anything took this much paperwork…"

"Welcome to being an adult," Maddie said against the back of his head. "It's all paperwork."

"Sounds like a blast." He settled a little more forward, scanning the piles. "What else is there?"

"Just a lot of this, bud."

He nodded. "Do I need to fill out anything?"

"We can worry about that tomorrow."

"But do I?"

Tom settled in a little closer. "You do," he said, slowly. "Before we have a home visit. You need to fill out a testimony."

"A what? Before the *what*?"

Maddie laughed, then stretched out a hand over his shoulder to pick up a smallish pile clipped in blue. "Next week, someone's going to come to the house. To talk about our life. Ask about where you go to school. What sort of routines we have. What you do for fun. Make sure the house is good, make sure you're good. Check on what kind of life you have here. What we feed you. That sort of thing."

“Make sure we’re not locking you in a basement all day, feeding you moldy cheese,” said Tom.

Maddie extended one leg enough to kick him.

“They’re coming to meet us. And they’re coming to meet you. They’ll probably pull you aside without us and ask you some bigger questions. And you’ll answer them honestly. And we have to give her these, too.” She brought the papers into her lap. “We had to write about why we want to be a family.”

Sonic twisted to look over Maddie’s arm at Tom, feeling his guard drop just enough again to poke around and say, “So you told them about last summer? How incredibly handsome and strong I am? Or that time I pushed you off a building! Actually, leave that out. That’s not great. But the time that I totaled that tank was *awesome!* Or what about-”

“I don’t think they’d condone that sort of father-son bonding.” Tom reached for the pile, flipping through to find a page. “No. Told them other stuff I thought was important.”

Sonic’s fingers itched, looking at the small stack of two or three lined papers in Tom’s hand. He swallowed. “And that important stuff is… secret?”

“It’s not,” said Tom. He offered the papers out. “Did you want to see?”

Sonic closed his fingers gingerly around the loose leaf.

It felt wrong to hold them. Like he was intruding. The hand Maddie had on his back slipped to hold him around the middle as he started to read. “‘For most of my life, I’ve been happy. Comfortable. I had a good job, I was married to my best friend, I knew what each day would be like. Routine was my bible. I knew what I’d have for breakfast. I knew that movie night was Friday. I knew when my wife would get home, knew what to say after fights, knew how to do my job. But comfortable can easily slip into a rut. Call it an itch, or a mid-life crisis, but I wanted a change. Something exciting. A shakeup. Keep most of the routines, add some new ones. Give myself just enough of an adventure to scratch that itch. I wanted to go to San Francisco. Be a big city cop. Save a life. Do something *important*.

And then, literally on my way out the door, this kid came crashing into our lives. My big city dreams went out the window along with every routine I’d ever depended on.

Some Fridays slip past without a movie night. I never go to bed on time. I barely know when I’ll get home anymore because there are baseball games and pickups from school and doctors appointments and god knows what else. My wife and I rarely get alone time. I’ve pretty much given up saving for that red Harley I always wanted. I’ll never be a big city cop.

This new life is exhausting. It’s expensive. It’s hard. And now I don’t remember what it was like to be comfortable. Everything about my life before was upended.”

Sonic stopped reading, swallowing hard.

Maddie combed a hand against his flattened ears. “Keep going.”

“But he said-”

“Keep going,” she soothed.

He rolled his shoulders, pushing away the dark nettles of hurt (and the woman behind him). "'Everything about my life before was upended," he read again, clipped voice sounding too loud in his own ears. "And I-" The words cut off, but his eyes kept moving, scanning the page as quickly as he could before they filled with tears and he couldn't see the letters anymore.

Tom reached for the papers. "How 'bout I keep going?" he asked, voice soft and warm. "I like this part best."

Sniffling, Sonic nodded and handed them over.

The sheriff cleared his throat, and began. "'And I couldn't be more grateful. All this time in my comfort, my routines, my rut, I wanted to do something important. Something that mattered. I now know for certain that *nothing* matters more to me than raising this boy. That making sure he's healthy and happy and loved is *the* most important thing I'll ever do. That I'll ever *want* to do. All the Harleys in the world can't compare with his smile when I pull up to the curb at school." His voice hitched on the last word and Sonic looked up.

The big, strapping man, the Donut Lord himself, had a fist pressed to his mouth, blinking back tears.

"Honey?" Maddie said.

"I'm okay," he said quickly, then shook his head. "No I'm not. Kinda glad we didn't do this with Wade and my parents here now."

Through his own tears, Sonic laughed, then crawled across the bed to settle in Tom's lap. "Just a couple of loose-cannons, playing by our own rules, right?"

Tom drew in a shuddering breath, wrapping his arms around the boy. "That's right, bud."

Maddie swiped at her own cheeks, then picked up the papers Tom had dropped. "Where were we? Ah, okay. 'No prime-time heroics could ever make me feel as proud as his amazement at my ability to change a tire. Nothing can make me love my tiny hometown like seeing it through his eyes. I thought I wanted adventure, but he's shown me that everyday is an adventure, and I wouldn't want to live a single one without him." She swiped at her eyes again. "I'd been searching a long time for something, not realizing I was just wandering around, trying to find my kid. I'm so lucky that my kid found me instead."

There was silence, save for the rustling of paper as Maddie set Tom's testimony down onto the bed. She used the bottom of her shirt to wipe at her eyes before turning on the bed.

Tom was saying something to Sonic, so quiet she couldn't hear even across the expanse of sheets. She could see Sonic's ears flicker, catching it all. Sonic said something back. She heard bits and pieces, content to settle her chin against her hand and take what she could. *Really?* She heard Sonic say. And then, "You can still trade me for a Harley."

Maddie laughed into her palm.

Tom's arms tightened around Sonic. "A Harley wouldn't appreciate my great jokes."

"They don't like Keanu, either."

“They definitely don’t,” agreed Tom. The snark was lost behind more tears hanging off his chin. “So I think I’ll stick with you.” He dipped his head and though Maddie couldn’t see it, in the quiet of the room, she heard her husband press a kiss to their son’s head.

Sonic twisted around in Tom’s lap. “That’s cool. Whatever,” he choked, managing to wrap his arms around Tom’s middle, face pressed away so neither of them could see.

Tom ran a hand down the blue quills. “Bud?”

Sonic managed a barely audible, “‘M’fine…”

It took him a minute. They saw his lithe shoulders shaking. There was quiet again for a moment until Sonic finally took a breath, wiping his face on Tom’s shirt.

“Gross,” said Tom, not looking like he meant it at all. His shirt was blotted, and he lifted it up, using it to wipe off the kid’s face again.

Sonic let him, sniffling. “Um…” he rasped. “Is there more?”

“We can wait until tomorrow,” Maddie offered.

He shook his head. “I’m fine.”

She nodded, flipping through to hers. “I wrote mine a few times,” she said, smoothing out the paper on the bedspread. “It’s a little shorter. I don’t have the same writing prowess as your father.”

Sonic was settling back into Tom’s lap, pulling up his knees. “That’s okay.”

“She’s being modest,” Tom muttered against Sonic’s fur. “Don’t listen to a word your mother says.”

“Well, thank you.” She held out the paper to Sonic. “Do you want to read?”

He shook his head.

“Right.” Maddie settled against the headboard. Slowly and clearly, she began to read. “I met my husband Tom while we were both in college. He was working towards a BA before the police academy, and I was just starting on the veterinary track. He asked if I wanted to go with him to dinner after three weeks in Psych 101 and I said yes. On the way to the restaurant, he rear ended another car. We wound up on the side of the road for an hour. When we finally got going again, the restaurant was already closed, so we ate drug store sandwiches in a parking lot.”

“Romantic,” said Sonic.

Tom pinched his ear. “Quiet. Casanova learned his tricks from me.”

Maddie cleared her throat. “I don’t think he expected me to say yes to another date. But I did. He got us tickets to a baseball game. We missed it because there was a lost dog on the way there, and he jumped out of the car in the middle of a freeway to catch it. We tracked down the owner on the other side of town. It took us hours. I said yes to date three after that.” She smoothed out the paper again. “It only took me two more awful, missed dates to want to marry him. There was a tow truck that needed help on date three. A stranded kid on date four. Everywhere we went, my husband helped, even if he didn’t get to do what he’d set out to do. And I loved that. He helped, and then he left. He never looked back. Even if it was at his own expense. It was sad sometimes, too. No one

helped him much. He never got anything in return. But he was okay with that. So my job became to show him how much I could do the same for him. How much I could help and love, because that's all he ever did for everyone else. It's my favorite thing about him. How much he helps. And loves."

"So when he showed up one day with a child that needed help, I didn't think twice about it. This was how my husband worked. He would help. He would leave. He wouldn't get anything in return. But something about this one time felt different from all the others. Something made me hold on just a little tighter and wonder if he shouldn't just walk away. Now I look back and see it so clearly…" She paused, taking in her own deep yoga breath.

"Mo-Maddie?" Sonic was looking at her from Tom's lap.

"I can read," Tom offered gently.

She shook her head. "I look back," she said again. "And I see it so clearly why I didn't want him to just walk away from this one. I was holding on so tight because, whether I knew it at the time or not, he'd brought us our son." The last few words were softer, dragged beneath an undertow.

She looked over at her husband and the hedgehog in his lap. She laughed. It was a wet noise, not helped by the streaks down her face. "I'm sorry," she choked, reaching over to rub her thumb across Sonic's face, clumping his fur with tears. "I'm making a mess out of my boys."

"S'okay," said Sonic, wobbly, like he was just barely above water. "I'm okay. You can keep going."

She laughed again, wiping her face. "I'll skip over some of it. I talk about your favorite things to eat. About baseball. About Big T and Miss Rosie. About that time you dislocated your shoulder and I chewed your head off about showing off at practice all the way to my office."

"I remember that," Tom said, squeezing Sonic's shoulder. "Don't think I've ever seen her so mad."

"Yeah," Sonic wiped his face (blush just barely hidden under tan fur) and gave his shoulder a roll. "That wasn't fun."

"No," she agreed. "And neither are the fights over cleaning your room. Or the fights over the booster seat. Or the teenage angst-" Each of the listed atrocities sent the hedgehog sinking lower and lower into Tom's lap until he was once again hiding his face against the man's t-shirt.

"You added all that?" He squeaked into the polyester blend.

"I did."

Tom laughed, dropping another kiss between his ears. "Maddie takes no prisoners, bud."

Sonic flushed again, miserable. "*Why* ."

"Because," she said, reaching out to squeeze his ankle. "I never had to do any of that before you showed up. And those are far and few compared to the good. Doesn't matter anyway. Even the frustrating times remind me I'm a mom. And I *really* love being a mom. I really love being *your* mom."

He swallowed.

She lifted her hand, picking up the paper again, skipping a few pages until the last one. Taking another breath she read, “My entire life has become packing gatorade before big games, having bedtimes and then breaking them, rushing out of the house because I forgot that I had a parent teacher conference. It’s become getting up in the morning and remembering that there’s someone else in the house who needs you as much as you need them.”

But the most amazing thing-” She paused, took another slow, shaky breath.

Tom stretched out a hand, touching her forearm and as he leaned forward, Sonic crawled out of his lap and over to hers (his perpetual emotional yo-yo - back and forth).

She gathered him up with one arm and tried again. “The most amazing thing is that even though he wasn’t always ours, he reminds me so much of his father. He’s kind, and he’s smart, and he just wants to help. I can’t describe how much I love him, because that’s the same as asking me why I love to breathe. This is a very long winded way of telling you not only that I *want* him to be my son, it’s letting you know that he always *has* been, even if it took him a little while to get here.”

Tom had grabbed the tissue box from her nightstand while she finished and he blew his nose. Sonic took one from the box and offered it to Maddie, who took it with a laugh.

“Thank you,” she said, swiping at her eyes.

Sonic nodded.

She stole another tissue from Tom, wiping off Sonic’s face. “Sweetheart.”

He sniffled, letting her scrub at his face.

She put the wadded tissues onto her bedside table, wrapping her arms around him again and pulling him close. “What do you think?”

He opened his mouth, but only managed a watery shrug.

“It’s a lot,” said Tom, his voice still drenched. He moved closer to them. He looked up at Maddie. “Maybe too much? For right now?”

“No.” Sonic said the word a little louder than he’d meant to. He wiped his nose. “It’s a good lot,” he echoed Maddie’s words from earlier. He played with one of the buttons on her shirt. “I have to write one too?”

“They’d like you to, yeah,” Tom said. “Doesn’t have to be a novel like ours were.”

The hedgehog laughed roughly. “And leave out the part about pushing you off a building, right?”

Tom reached out and rubbed his ears. “Probably best.”

He closed his eyes, leaned into the touch.

He could have stayed like that, but Ozzie yipping at the door downstairs broke the three out of their huddle.

“Poor Ozzie needs to go out,” Maddie mumbled.

Tom was already swinging his legs over the side of the bed, jamming on slippers kept next to his nightstand. “I’ve got him.”

Sonic shifted, swallowing back a groan. Why now? Why did Ozzie have to pull them away *now?* He felt Maddie kiss the top of his head. “We’ll make it quick, right, Dad?”

“Right, Mom,” Tom said, smiling as he dipped back in to plant a kiss of his own before pushing off the bed. “Back in a sec, bud.”

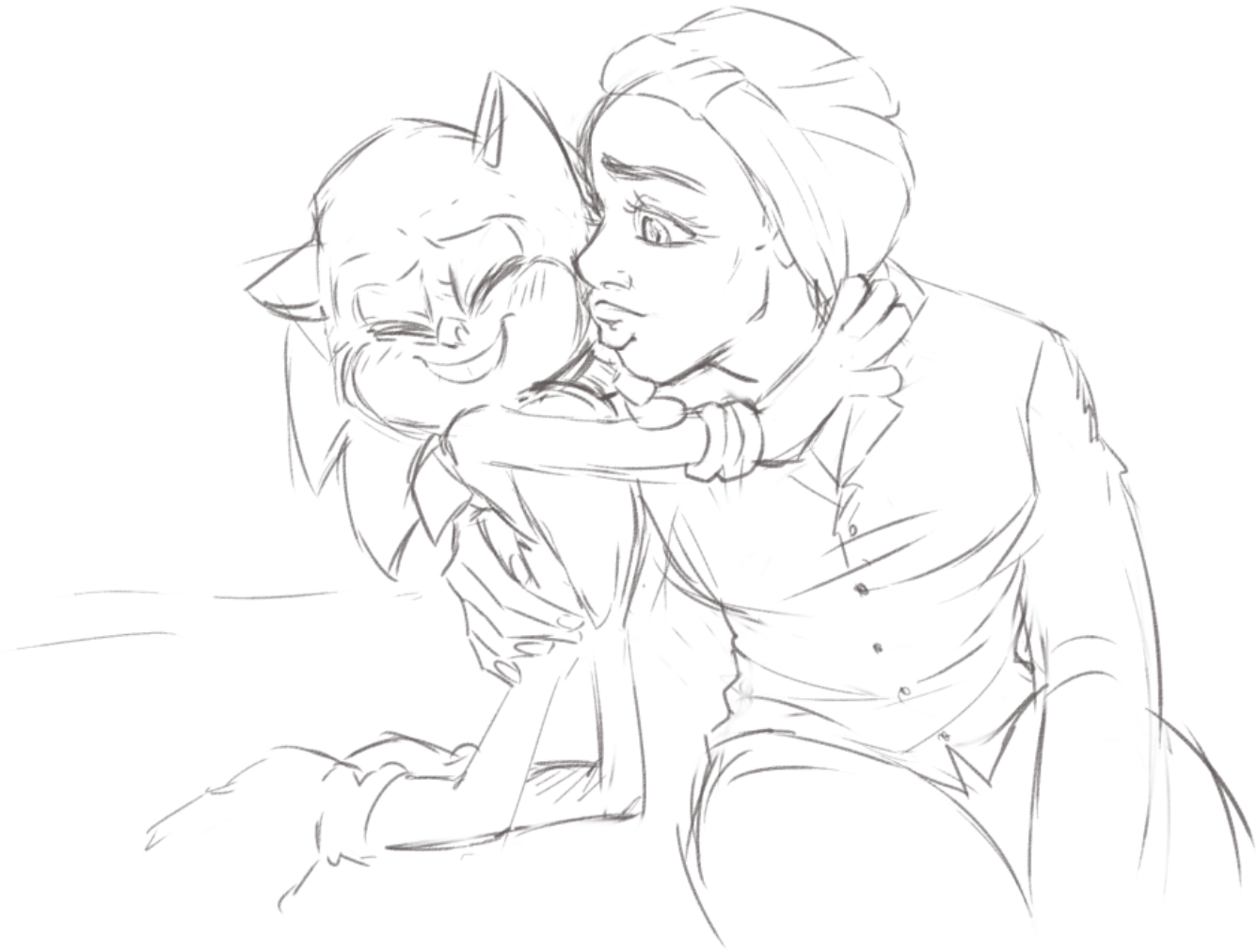
Maddie’s hand stayed on his back, moving up and down as Tom wandered out into the hall. They heard him whistle and call Ozzie’s name. The back screen door opened with a squeak and banged shut.

Sonic rubbed at the spot Tom had kissed with his paw. “Is this going to be a thing?”

Beside him, Maddie snorted. “What’s *this* ?”

“Just… this.” He rubbed at the spot again, trying to fumble through words. “Just- all this…”

“Hmmm?” He could hear her smile. “You mean this?” Then her face was next to his and she was pressing her lips to his cheek. He bit back a laugh. “This?” Another kiss, this time in his neck and the laugh slipped out. “Or this?” The next kiss turned into a raspberry and his shoulders shot up, unable to stop the giggles. “This?”



She moved to razz him again, but he put up a hand to her face, still laughing. “Mo-ooooom! Yes *that* ! Cut it out!”

She pulled back.

Outside, Ozzie barked. Tom shouted something that sounded like *stay away from the mud!* There was more silence.

Maddie stared.

He watched her, ears pinned, blinking. “What? What did I-” His ears went further back and he reached towards Maddie, like he’d somehow burned her. “Mom? I didn’t mean to- I mean… the… the gross love is great. Really. Not gross at all. I’m super manly, but it’s totally fine. I can handle it! Or, no, that’s a lie. I love it. I really do. I never thought- I mean- I didn’t think I’d ever- I mean… it’s *great* , it is. Don’t stop. I lied before. I don’t know why I did that. Or maybe I do. I keep lying. I’m sorry. I’m not that manly. I’ll take all the hugs and everything else, really, I will! Zero complaints from *this* guy! Totally zero and… and… Mom?”

She kept staring. Her hands drifted up to her face, pressing her fingers against her mouth.

Sonic’s eyes welled, panic beginning to sink in. “I really didn’t- I mean- Are you okay…?” His hands, wildly moving about before, dropped to the duvet when he uttered a soft, “I’m sorry.”

“No, no, don’t be!” Her hands were fluttering now, her eyes glistening. “Baby, I’m sorry, I didn’t- you’ve just never called me-” She lost her words in a sharp inhale.

“Called you-” His ears snapped up as his eyes widened.

He had.

He *had* .

And it had felt *right.*

He’d been so afraid, for so long. Even through all their insistence that they *were* . That she *was* . Now that it was out, the word from *his* mouth permeating the air around them, he wondered why he’d ever been afraid at all.

“You okay, Mom?”

She nodded hard, gathering him up in her arms again. “So so so *so* okay, oh my goodness.”

He smiled against the soft fabric of her pajamas. “Sorry it took so long.”

“Nope, nuh-uh.” She buried her nose in his fur. “No more ‘sorry’s. Oh my goodness, baby. Oh my goodness.”

He nodded into her shirt.

“I love you,” she said into his fur. “Me and your father- we love you. You know that, right?”

“I know,” he said.

“Good.”

The back door creaked open again, and they heard Ozzie thundering up the stairs. The screen door closed, and they heard the sink running and turning off. And then Tom’s footsteps were moving to the second floor.

Ozzie jumped into bed, bounding in a circle before settling down.

By the time Ozzie had settled, Tom was in the doorway again with a glass in his hand.

“Here, bud,” he said when he was back on the side of the bed. He scrubbed at Sonic’s face. “Gotta rehydrate.”

“Mom too,” the boy said. He took a sip and then offered it to Maddie.

“Thank you, baby.”

Over his head, the adults’ eyes met.

‘Mom???’ Tom mouthed.

Glass to her lips, Maddie could only waggle her eyebrows in delight.

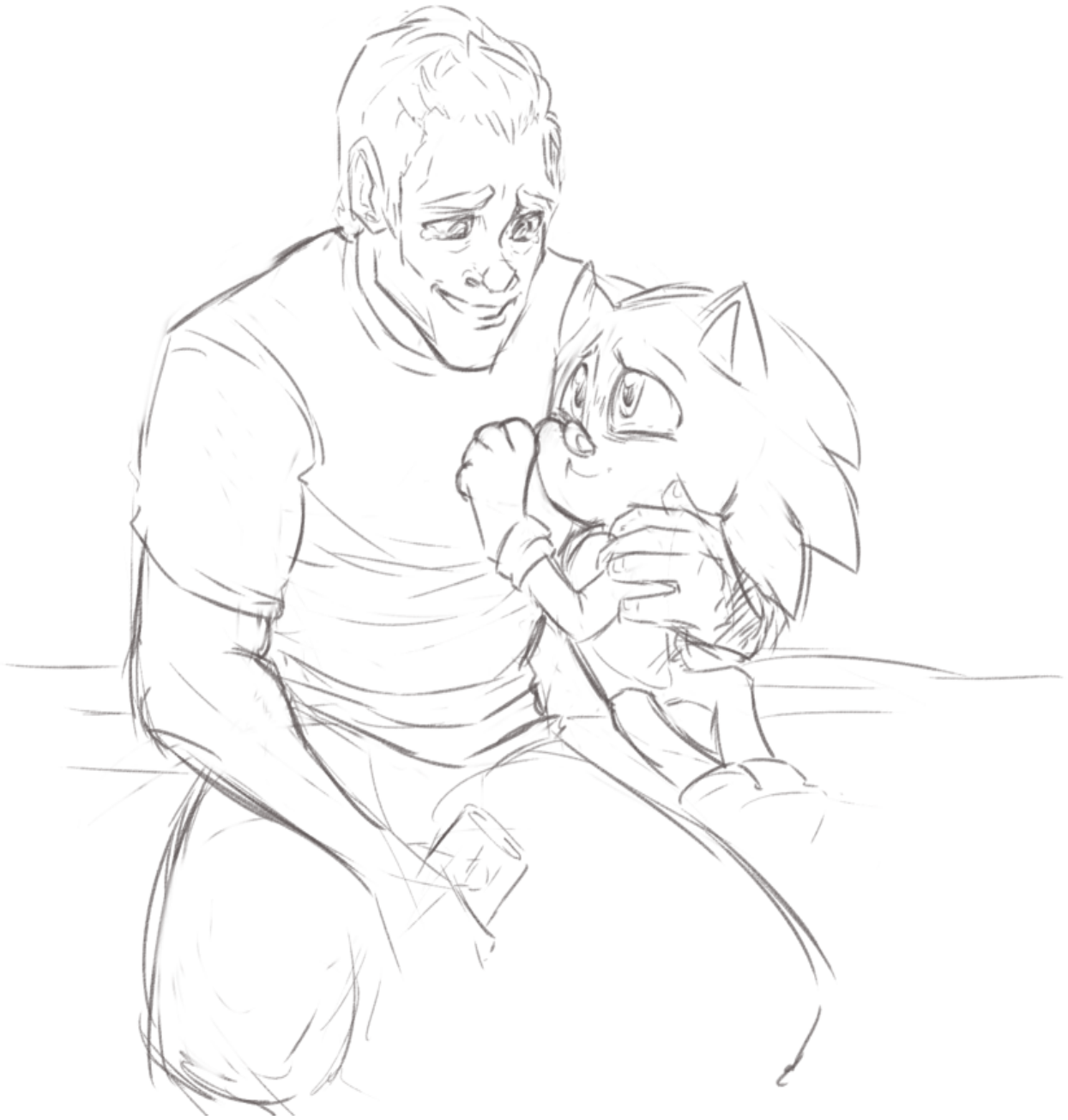
Then Sonic was taking the glass back and pushing it into Tom’s hands. “And Dad cried the most.”

“As per usual,” Maddie said, smirking. “Aaaaaannnnd there he goes again.”

The word had struck Tom like a blow.

“Hon?” Maddie reached past Sonic.

Tom waved her off. “M’fine.” He wiped his eyes with the bottom of his shirt. “It’s all fine.” He sat on the bed again, reaching over to draw Sonic to his side. “You don’t- Kiddo, if you don’t want to, if you’re not ready, you don’t need to call me that.”



Sonic gripped his shirt and blinked up at Tom. “I wanted to. I just wasn’t sure if you-”

“God, bud… if you knew how much I’ve been wanting to hear that-”

Sonic swallowed. “I’m sorry. I should have said it earlier…”

“No.” Tom dropped another kiss between his ears. “Only when you’re ready. And if you’re not ready, I don’t mind.”

Sonic clung tight. “I wanted to say it,” he explained, slowly. “I did. I just didn’t know if I- I mean…” He tucked his face away. “They’re Big Words,” he muttered. “And… and sometimes people that I get too close to… sometimes it doesn’t work out.”

The adults exchanged another glance over his head and then Maddie was scooting closer and he was being squeezed from both sides. “Oh baby,” she murmured.

“We’re not going *anywhere* ,” Tom said. “That’s what this whole thing’s for. To let you and the whole world know that you’re stuck with us.”

Sonic was surrounded, enveloped, encircled. He closed his eyes and breathed them in. Cut grass and coconut and leather and lavender and mountain air. Smells he knew so well now. Smells he wouldn’t have to work to remember. Because they’d always be there.

With him.

“I’d like that.”

“Us too, bud,” Tom said.

Beside him, Maddie yawned. “I don’t know about you boys, but I’m *exhausted.* ”

“Ditto,” came Tom’s reply, before he caught her yawn.

Sonic looked between them. His hands were still curled in Maddie’s shirt. From the end of the bed, Ozzie looked over at the huddle with a speculative glance, as if to say, *you’re here, too?*

Sonic squirmed.

His fur was beginning to get clumped and itchy around his eyes and his chest and head started to throb from all the crying. He sniffled, rubbing at his eyes.

Maddie clicked her tongue. “You sure you don’t want to take a shower tonight?”

His entire body felt like it was melting into the mattress. “Um…” he said.

She twisted around to look at the clock. Hours had passed. The numbers, glowing red on the walls, signaled that it had just passed midnight. “A quick one,” she declared. “You’ll sleep better, sweetheart. Promise.”

He agreed with a halfhearted nod.

It was about time they kicked him out of their room, anyway.

Tom grabbed his hand, pulling him off the bed and reaching down to help pull the t-shirt over his head. “Five minutes, bud. Just rinse off.”

“Mmm’kay.”

Despite feeling like his legs were sinking into the tub, the shower helped. He walked out feeling a little warmer, and a little less itchy. Soon, the entire bathroom smelled like turf and peppermint.

His fur and quills were still damp, not bothering to blow dry them. He could hear Tom and Maddie talking softly in their room, and he followed the voices down the hall.

Tom was under the covers, nodding about something Maddie had said, scrolling through his phone. Maddie was standing by the bed, putting the last of the clipped packets into the manilla folder again.

“Uh…” He knocked on the doorframe. The night's events had clung to him through the shower, and he felt them sticking to him like brambles. He’d had time to think while he’d been surrounded by steam. All of the Big Words that he’d heard - that he’d *said* - were beginning to leave him feeling heavy.

He wasn’t really sure what to do next.

As if saying those names for the first time would open up a secret book filled with the knowledge he needed; *How To Be a Son; Calling your Parents Mom and Dad, and Other Neat Tricks!* Instead, he was left without much direction, and tried not to seem too lost as he stared into the room and watched both of their eyes on him.

“Uh,” he said again, kicking lightly against the door.

Tom’s eyes crinkled around the edges. “All clean?”

“Yup,” he said, too quickly. “Yup, yup, yup. All- all done. So…” He pointed to the t-shirt still on the bed. “I needed… Um.”

Maddie, standing on Tom’s side of the bed, slid the folder back into his nightstand and then twisted to grab up the shirt. “Oh, yes, of course, c’mere.” Deftly she bundled it up so she was holding the collar open, waving him over with well-worn cotten.

He crossed the threshold feeling a little less like an intruder. Arms raised, he let her slip the t-shirt over his head, let her smooth out his damp quills. “There we go.” She tweaked his nose. “Much better.”

“Thanks Madd-Mom…” He shook his head. “Sorry.”

“Told you no more ‘sorry’s, mister.” She cupped his cheek in one hand, dragging him closer for a loud kiss between his brows. “Now c’mon. Let’s get to bed.”

“Right.” His eyes moved past her to where Tom was yawning and Ozzie was snoring. “Yeah. G’night, you guys.” He took a step back towards the door.

In the bed, Tom raised an eyebrow. “Where ya goin’, bud?”

He pointed towards the door. “My bed.”

Tom reached behind him for one of his two stacked pillows, drawing it out and setting it in the middle. He gave it two, firm *thwumps* . “You’re bunking with us tonight.”

“I’m-” he looked at Maddie, who was walking around the bed to her side. “I should go to my room…”

Maddie drew back the covers. “Not tonight,” she yawned. “C’mere.”

“But-” his fists drew up under his chin. “My quills are spiky.”

“We’ll manage,” she said, patting the middle of the bed.

“I kick in my sleep.”

“I’ve got thick shins,” Tom rebutted. “Years of sleeping next to this one made me strong.”

“Shuddup,” said Maddie. She yawned again. “Honey. If you don’t want to, you don’t have to. We just didn’t want you alone tonight if you didn’t want to be.”

“Alone? I’m… I’m so good at being alone,” said Sonic, quickly. “The best, actually. “Was alone for a *long* time.”

It was the wrong thing to say, he knew. The words flew out of him before he could stop it, and he winced, waiting for her Sonic Pity Face to show up and ruin their night. When it didn’t, his shoulders relaxed. “Sweetheart,” she soothed, “you’re not anymore. Never again. You *know* that. But do you want to be alone *tonight?”*

He didn’t.

At all.

“C’mon, kiddo,” Tom said, patting the pillow again.

Sonic looked down at Ozzie. “I thought only dogs were allowed here.”

“What?” Tom looked down at the dog, who was drooling on their duvet. There was a muddy pawprint in the corner that would be hell to scrub out. “Course not, bud.”

Sonic shook his head. “Yes! That was a *rule* . You *said* -”

“A rule?” Maddie blinked. “There was a…” She looked at her husband. “ *Thomas* .”

“What! It was a-”

“Swear to God, you say it was just a joke.”

“It *was* !”

She grabbed one of the accent pillows from the floor and whacked him.

Sonic let out a little laugh, surprise mixed up with a new sort of relief that was becoming commonplace with them. He made a small mental note to start asking for clarification when he wasn’t sure they were kidding or not.

"Bad joke," muttered Tom, massaging his jaw.

“Honey, you can *always* come in here,” she said, while Tom picked up his pride and the accent pillow. “If you need us, we’re here.”

He looked around the room, uncertainty just barely clinging on. “But this is your space…”

“It is,” she said. “So knock first. Just like we do for you on the attic steps.”

“Oh,” he said.

“I love Ozzie, bud,” Tom added, carefully putting the accent pillow under the bed, out of his wife’s reach. “But he’s not my *son* .”

Muzzle warm, Sonic smiled. “Right.”

Maddie climbed into bed, and then held out a hand. “So c’mon. Get in here already.”

Hesitation finally gone, he scaled the duvet, navigating around Ozzie on his way to the spot between them. He leaned back against the pillow they’d laid out for him. Tom pulled the blanket up to his chest.

The day finally began to take a toll on Sonic, who stuck to the mattress as soon as his head touched the pillow. It smelled like Tom. Like his shampoo. Like cedar and tea tree. He buried his face against it, breathing.

The baseball game, the talk, the realization; it all began to take its toll.

He didn’t remember a time his legs felt this heavy.

He wiggled his toes. His feet were sore. Practicing running slowly was more work than it seemed. He was exhausted. Emotionally, physically, completely exhausted.

Tom hiked up the covers again.

“Yer tuckin’ me in…” Sonic slurred.

“Mmmmhm,” hummed Tom.

“So manly,” Sonic mumbled.

Maddie’s hand was on his back, running along his spine in that gentle way she always did. “Oh very.” Her nose brushed his cheek, then her lips did the same. “Night, Sonic.”

“M’ so happy…”

“That’s good,” she said. “But we can talk about it tomorrow.”

“T’night,” he muttered. “M’wide ‘wake…”

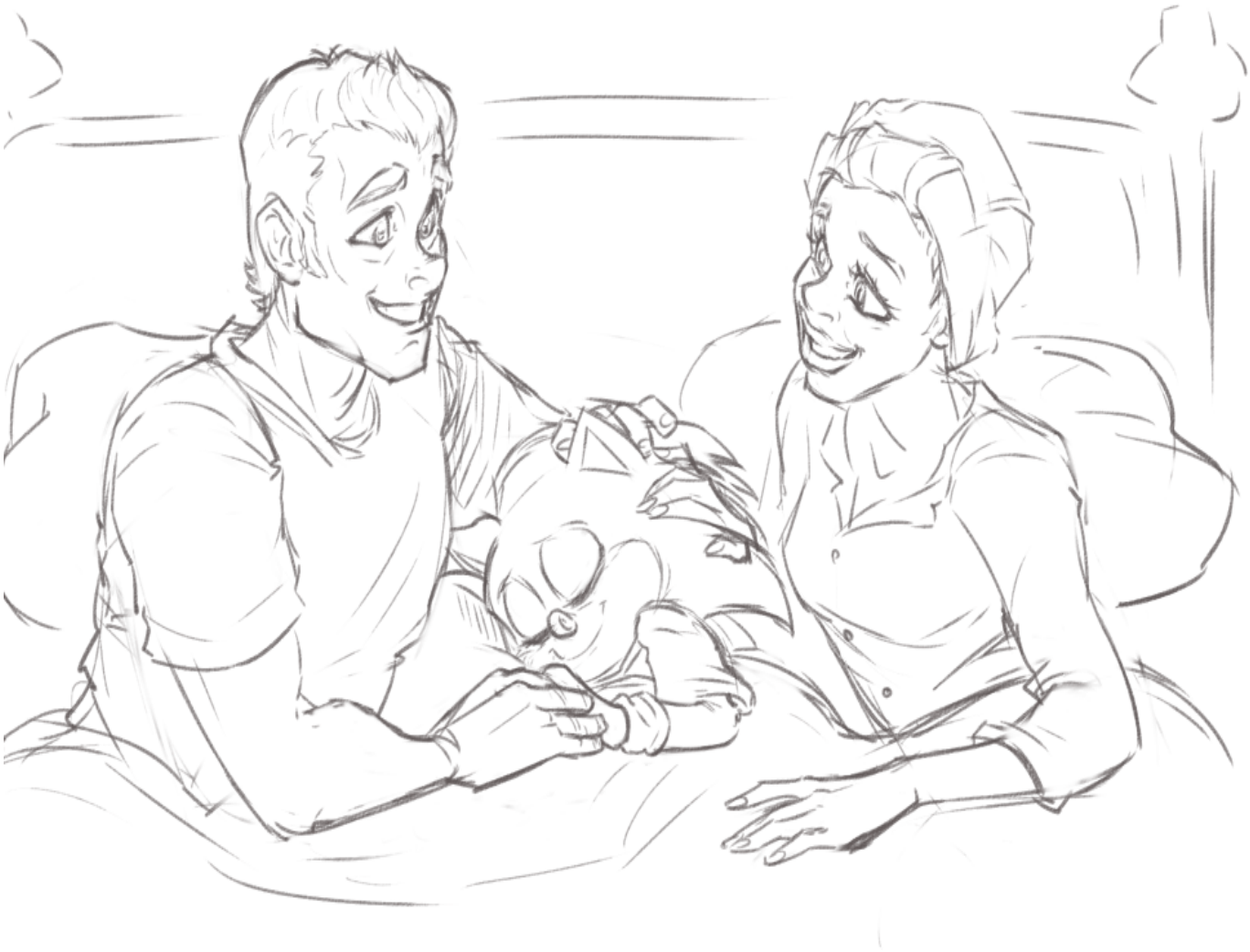
“Course you are,” she said, hand still moving. Up and down. Up and down. Up and down.

He didn’t have the energy to point out that it was strategic. The gentle movements against his spine. He sank deeper into the mattress. “Goodnight.”

“We love you,” Tom said, leaning in for one more kiss himself. Then he stretched out and hit the light, plunging the room into moonlight again.

Eyes closed, Sonic could only manage a sleepy hum, but under the covers, his hand found Tom’s. He gave it a squeeze, and then drifted off.

For a long moment, the only sound in the room was his gentle breathing, and an occasional snort from Ozzie. Then-



“Oh my *god*, babe,” Maddie whispered.

“I *know*,” Tom whispered back. “I’d kiss you right now, but I don’t wanna wake him.”

Between them, Sonic rolled onto his side.

She beamed, reaching out to drag her fingers down the quills that had gotten tangled against the pillow. “Tomorrow.”

“That was *good*,” he said. “I mean, right?”

“*So* good,” she nodded. “Un*believably* good. I honestly cannot get over how *good* that was.”

“Holy shit,” Tom breathed, relaxing into his pillow at last.

“Yup.” She mirrored him.

Sensing a shift, Sonic made a soft noise and rolled over again, seeing out something. He found Maddie and burrowed his face into her side. She froze, afraid to wake him up and ruin the moment, looking up at Tom who was reaching for his phone.

“*Don’t*,” she hissed. “*He’ll see it!”*

“I’m chancing it,” he hissed back.

Taking a chance herself, she wound her arms around the boy. He didn’t wake up and she collected him close, ignoring the little *snip* of a noise from Tom’s side of the bed. His phone went back into its place.

Sonic’s breaths puffed against her pajamas. One of his feet kicked softly against her shins and then settled.

A pause, and then he ventured, “I think my mixing up the jerseys turned out to be a blessing in disguise.”

She kicked him lightly underneath the covers, careful to avoid waking up the child now glued to her side. “Don’t you ruin my just-got-called-’Mom’ high.”

He grinned. “Just sayin’.”

“Well, quit it, you.”

“Yes *Mom*.”

She bit her bottom lip to keep from squealing. “I still can’t get over it.”

“Right there with you.”

She kicked at him again. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

And with their son between them, they closed their eyes and closed the book on a day that they’d all agree, even years later, was one of the best they ever had.

Chapter End Notes

And thaaaaaaaaat's the end!! Not really, there's still the epilogue yet to come! But this wraps up the 5+1 portion of the story!

I want to give a HUUUUUGE thank you to @Humanities_Handbag for helping me write this chapter! It's 12K+ of wonderful, funny, heartfelt moments with this little family that we both

adore and this chapter wouldn't have been the same without her! So all the love and hugs to her!!

Edited to add: Now with illustrations by the always PHENOMENALLY talented @thebigpalooka over on Tumblr! So all the love and hugs to her as well!! <3 <3 <3

End Notes

So the AMAZING folks over at Blue Hawk Audioworks are doing an audio-version of the fic!!

The fist chapter is right here: https://youtu.be/XskxGBLgT0s

The second chapter is here: https://youtu.be/sjbO97ExvKQ

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!